

HALE MERRILL'S HONEY QUEST



ANNIE ELIZABETH HARRIS



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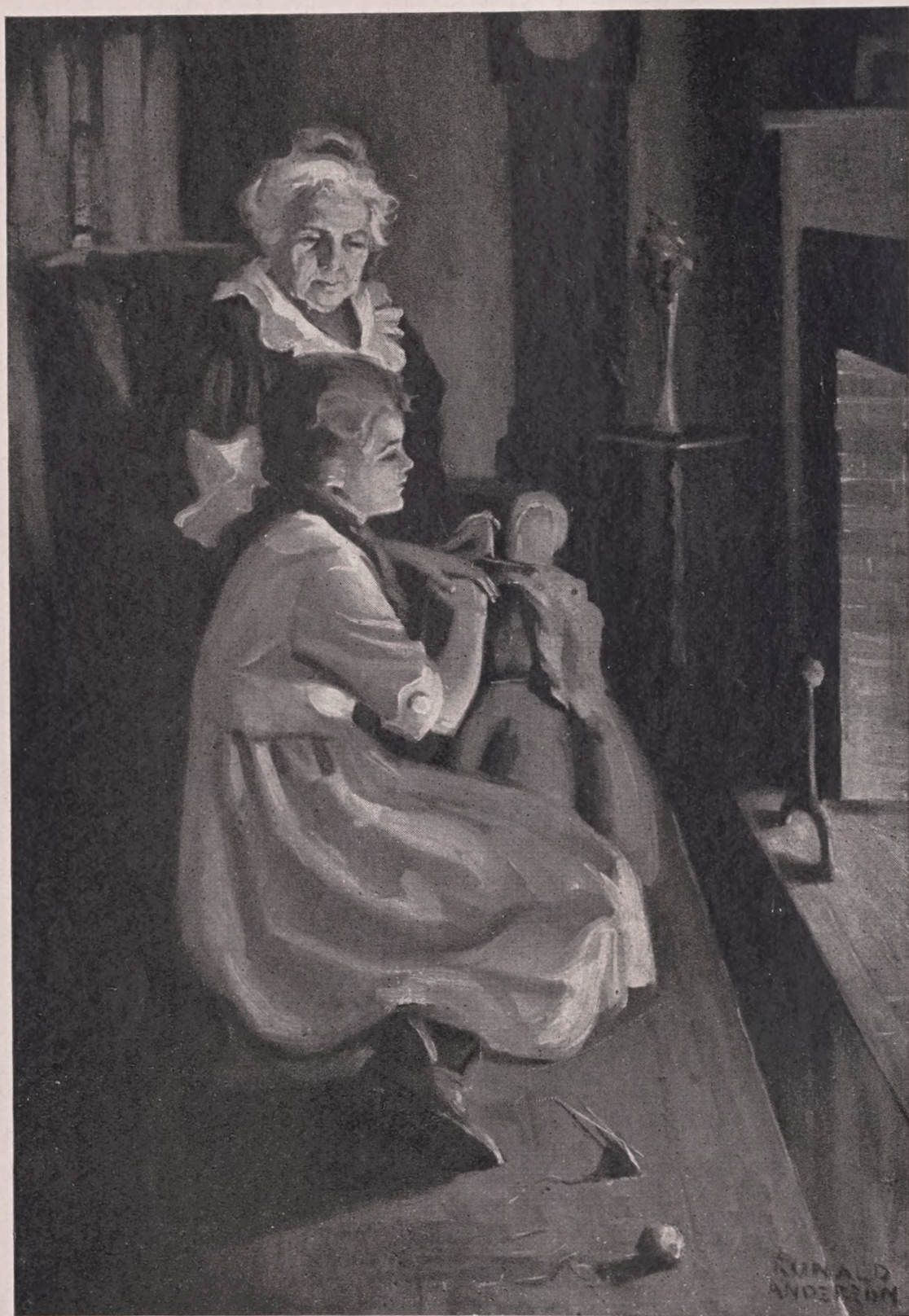
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**HALE MERRILL'S
HONEY QUEST**



"YOU WILL FIND YOUR HONEY IN EVERY SITUATION IN LIFE IF YOU
LOOK FOR IT."—Page 42.

HALE MERRILL'S HONEY QUEST

How One Girl Made the Best of Things

By

ANNIE ELIZABETH HARRIS

ILLUSTRATED BY RONALD ANDERSON



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HALE MERRILL'S HONEY QUEST

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TO
MY FATHER

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HALE MERRILL'S HONEY QUEST

HOW ONE GIRL MADE THE BEST OF
THINGS

CHAPTER I

A NEW ORDER

TO Hale Merrill, in her fourteenth year, four dreadful things had happened with bewildering rapidity.

To begin with, her dear little mother was gone. Carefully as they had tried to prepare Hale for the loss, it was hard for her to realize that the little chum who had fallen asleep so peacefully on the couch by her side had been taken away out of the house and put where she could never see her again.

She had promised to be brave and she did try her best to live up to her promise. If her governess had been less patient and sym-

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pathetic she felt sure that she would have failed utterly. As it was, Miss Dwight had been a constant comfort in every possible way.

Then, without any preparation, Hale was told that Miss Dwight was going to leave. The news came to her from her Aunt Alice, who since the death of her mother had somehow appeared from she knew not where and taken charge of the things and the persons in her father's house.

Hale might have known that something unpleasant would follow in the train of this unwelcome guest; but for a week she had merely lived along from day to day in hope that the strange aunt would soon depart the way she came and leave them in peace. Miss Dwight would not let her talk about Aunt Alice, but Hale could see that they both felt alike about the new order of things.

When Aunt Alice told her in blunt, unsoftened suddenness that her governess was going away that very day at noon, Hale could not believe it; she listened in puzzled surprise and then shook her head.

“She wouldn’t go, Aunt Alice; she is my best friend. Mother left everything in her care. Why! she couldn’t go.”

“But she is going, I tell you. It’s all right, of course. She has a new position. You’ll be as well off without her.”

Hale flew to Miss Dwight.

The confusion of packing which reigned in Miss Dwight’s room was answer enough to her doubts.

“Oh, it is true!” she cried in grieved astonishment.

“Yes, dearie, it is true; though I was coming to tell you myself after breakfast. I didn’t know you were up.”

“Oh, but Miss Dwight! why are you going?”

“Because it seems best, honey. I can’t explain all my reasons now, but I know you will see what they are by and by.”

She took the little figure into her arms and held her till the worst of the storm was over. Then she comforted her as best she could, though it was not easy work when she was so near to tears all the time herself.

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The departure of Miss Dwight had scarcely been effected when Miss Merrill saw fit to break another piece of news to her niece.

"Now we must pack your things and get started for Hawthorne as soon as we can," she said briskly.

Thus casually did the third misfortune dawn upon Hale's horizon. She looked at her tormentor in scornful resentment.

"I am not going to Hawthorne," she declared stoutly.

"Oh, yes, you are, little Miss Wilful. You mustn't speak to me that way."

"What am I going to Hawthorne for?" she asked, a trifle less vehemently.

"To live with your grandmother and me," she was told.

Again Hale fled from the unwelcome fact to seek an explanation.

"What does Aunt Alice mean?" she begged her father to tell her.

"She means that for a time it seems best that you should live with Grandmother and Aunt Alice," was the reply, spoken very tenderly.

“To *live!*” gasped Hale. “Why, Father, I should die! I hate Aunt Alice.”

“My dear,” warned her father, “be very careful what you say. You do not know Aunt Alice yet; and I hope my little daughter will never allow herself to hate any one.”

“But, Father! it will be dreadful to live with any one who is so strict and hard. Are you going to live there, too?”

“No, darling; I have another plan.”

Then very gently, Hale was told the fourth calamity; which was that her father had business interests in a western State which required his immediate attention. He was, therefore, forced to leave his little daughter in the hands of her aunt, and go to the mines to investigate and straighten out the tangle of affairs. It was a matter of his father's estate, and concerned them all.

She listened very gravely to the explanation.

“And what will become of the wonderful play you are writing?” she asked.

“I shall take it with me and finish it out there,” he said.

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"How long are you planning to stay?" she asked, when they had talked about it calmly and she had agreed to be courageous.

"Perhaps six months," he told her; "perhaps a year."

Hale sighed heavily.

"A year! that's just about forever. Of all the dreadful things that have happened to me lately that is the worst. With Mother gone I still had you and Miss Dwight; then Miss Dwight went and I thought I still had you; but with you gone I have no one but Aunt Alice, and she doesn't care about me one mite. Does everybody have such a hard life?"

"It is hard, dear one," agreed her father, "but there is another side to the picture which you know nothing about."

"What is that?"

"In a word, it is your grandmother. You have never seen my mother, and I want you to know her before it is too late."

"Why have I never seen her?" asked Hale.

"To state the matter briefly, it is because your Aunt Alice and I quarreled a long time ago."

“What did you quarrel about?”

“It isn’t necessary for you to know that. Suffice it to say that your grandmother agreed with Alice to the extent that she never came to visit us, and, I need not add, I have felt it would be neither wise nor kind to intrude upon them.”

“Then why does Aunt Alice come intruding now and make me go home with her? Truly, Father, I’d rather go to an orphan asylum. Please put me in an asylum, or take me with you!”

“Hush, darling! You don’t know what you are saying. As I have told you, I want you to know your grandmother. She will be a balm for all you can possibly suffer from any other source. I am very glad Aunt Alice wants you there, for it exactly suits my desire for you. Aunt Alice is not an ogre. She is a little strict, no doubt, and not as companionable as the people you have lived with; but once you get used to her ways you will try to do what she wants you to and there will be no difficulty.”

Hale shook her head doubtfully.

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"I'll have to be a brave soldier with a do-or-die spirit, for I know I shall not want to do as she says."

"You have some cousins out there in Hawthorne who may help to make your life happy," suggested her father, thinking the other phase of the question had been followed long enough.

"Have I? How big are they?"

"Roy must be about your age, and Forest perhaps twenty or thereabout."

"Are they Merrills, too?"

"No; their mother is my sister; she is now Hammond by name."

Hale asked a great many questions about the new cousins, which her father could not answer. The old quarrel with Alice had made him sensitive toward all the family and he had been content to devote all his attention to his invalid wife and their little Hale. He remembered Forest as a little fellow, but Roy had been born since he had left Hawthorne.

The thought of new cousins made a strong appeal to Hale, for she had a natural interest

in people, and her circumscribed life had kept her shut away from them to a large extent. With her healthy curiosity regarding them, she could think of the new arrangements with better courage, and entered into the preparations more willingly on that account.

She refrained from asking Aunt Alice the volume of questions that thronged her mind, because the necessary packing was taking more time than that lady wanted to spare and was adding daily to her crustiness.

All was complete at last, however, and she and Hale were whirled away to the station, with Father to hold her hands till the last minute and keep up her spirits with a huge box of candy and constantly repeated promises to write very often. The importance of taking a train was enough to keep her steady for a time, but when the good-bys were all over and she realized that the cool, collected aunt beside her was to rule her destiny for a year, she lost her courage completely and cried all the way to Hawthorne.

CHAPTER II

DELIA

THE little shingled cottage before which the station auto deposited Miss Merrill and the tear-stained Hale was brown and weather-beaten, and hidden half out of sight behind lilac bushes.

Standing alone on a hillside overlooking the village, it seemed to Hale a desolate refuge for a little girl already as homesick as a body could well be. A fresh supply of tears began to well up at the thought of all her causes for misery.

“There, Hale!” said Aunt Alice in her crisp way; “I think you’ve cried enough for one while. Come, come! You’ll make yourself sick.”

Hale wished that she might make herself sick enough to die and escape the hardships of this present life; but she did her best to

crowd back her tears and stumble blindly out on the broad door-stone.

The door of the little house opened, and some one came out to help carry in the bags, umbrellas, and wraps. Hale heard her aunt say, "This is Delia," and "This is Hale." She nodded sorrowfully and followed Miss Merrill into the house and up to her room, where she stood disconsolately watching the bestowal of her trunk and other possessions.

"Take off your hat, Hale, and lay it up here on the shelf in the closet. Put your umbrella back in the far corner. I shall expect you to keep your things nice and tidy."

Hale obeyed mechanically.

The room was really a very cozy little nook which Delia and Grandmother had been preparing for the new member of the family. Hale would have thought the gray-and-rose finish very pretty if she could have forgotten the big lump in her heart.

"I'm going to change my dress," said Aunt Alice, briskly; "then I'll come back and help you unpack your trunk."

When she had gone Hale moved over to the

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window and looked out. Seeing the porch roof just below, she had for a moment a wild idea of escaping by its help and running, far, far away to find her father and beg him to take her with him out west—or anywhere but here. There were people talking on the porch below, however, so that way was cut off.

The hill sloped gently down to a river, from which it rose as gently on the other side and climbed through orchards and grass-land up to the wooded hills. The very width of outlook made Hale feel lonesome and empty. As she gazed in fascinated misery, one of the voices on the porch became audible to her.

Delia was saying, “The poor little thing is just a-breakin’ her heart for her father ’n’ mother, and I’m sure I don’t blame her.”

The touch of pity was more than Hale could bear. She put her arm upon the casement and sobbed afresh. When Aunt Alice came back she was still standing there, though quieter in her grief.

“Come, come, child! this will never do. You must think of something else and spunk

up. See what a pretty view there is off there toward the hills.”

“It’s dreadfully lonesome,” sighed Hale, with a sob and a shake of her head.

“Does it seem that way to you?” asked Aunt Alice.

“Yes, it does,” declared Hale with emphasis. “It is lonesome and disagreeable and miserable and horrid; and I didn’t want to come, anyway.”

“I know you didn’t.”

Aunt Alice continued to unpack the trunk and put the things away in bureau and closet. She made no attempt to comfort her niece. Not that she hadn’t in her own mind a dozen answers to the charge that Hawthorne was any of the things Hale had said. Aunt Alice loved the place, every nook and crevice of it, but she did not expect Hale to agree with her just yet. It was hardly likely, she reasoned, that a girl brought up as Hale had been would care for the beauties of nature.

Well, that was only one of the many lessons the girl would have to learn. Miss Merrill

sighed. To tell the truth, she felt herself to be quite as much an object of pity as Hale. The care she had undertaken would require a great deal of sacrifice on her part. She was giving up her quiet, well-ordered existence to devote her energies to this odd little creature whose ways were likely to need a good deal of altering.

To begin with, Hale must be taught that there were other people in the world besides herself. Between her mother and father and Miss Dwight, the child had grown up with the idea that the world revolved about herself and her little affairs. She would have to find out her mistake.

"She may as well begin right now," thought Miss Merrill. "It will give her something to think about."

"Come, Hale," she said aloud; "you may take the things out of this tray and put them away neatly in the bureau. I have some work to do for myself before supper. Change your dress for something light and come down at six o'clock, for Grandmother likes to be prompt."

When Aunt Alice had gone, Hale dried her tears and began to do as she had been told. The array of small boxes in the tray had been carefully packed in Aunt Alice's most methodical fashion. They looked as prim and proper as that lady herself.

"I shall expect you to keep your things nice and tidy," she quoted irritably.

She transferred the boxes to her bureau drawer and arranged her brushes and toilet articles on the wide dresser. Pictures of her father and mother in silver frames were also set out, not without a woebegone sigh, for Hale was very sorry for herself and would have been crying again but for Delia's appearance in the doorway.

Delia was one of those motherly souls who know just what other people need to make them happy. The pathos of Hale's lot in being removed to a strange house just when she had lost her mother went straight to the kind Irish heart of her and prompted her to comfort the lonely little girl in her own peculiar way.

So there she stood in the doorway with a

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plate of cookies and a glass of milk which she held out invitingly.

"Have a bit of a lunch?" she asked.

"Oh, thank you, Delia. How nice of you to do that! Sit down a minute and have some with me."

Delia laughed an embarrassed chuckle and declined to sit; but she leaned against the bedpost and accepted a cookie just for company's sake.

"Sit yourself," she laughed. "I'll be needed below stairs in a minute or two."

"These are good, Delia. Did you make them?" asked Hale in the midst of the third cookie.

"Oh, yes, dear; they're simple enough. You could make them yourself without half trying."

"Dear me! I guess I'd have to try a good many times before I could do very well at it."

"I'll show you some one of these days," promised Delia.

"Oh, will you? How lovely! There, that was delicious. Thank you so much."

She passed the plate and the glass back to

Delia, who set them on the stand by the door.

“Would you like to have me brush your hair a little?” she asked in an eager, half-doubtful tone.

“Oh, will you?” cried Hale. “I haven’t had my hair really brushed since Miss Dwight went away. You see I am not used to doing it myself and it’s so heavy I can’t do much with it.”

Hale had slipped off the ribbon and was unplaiting the braid as she spoke. She handed a heavy brush to Delia and dropped into a chair. It would be hard to say which was happier, Hale who had missed being mothered these last few weeks or Delia who had found a new outlet for her overflowing desire to do things for people.

“Such beautiful hair!” said Delia.

“Oh, yes, it’s rather nice. It’s all I have to be vain about, so I make the most of it.”

“Hear the child!” laughed Delia. “It’s a wonder the good Lord wouldn’t strike you blind for saying a thing like that.”

“Well! what else have I?” demanded Hale, reaching for her hand-mirror. “Surely

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not this little short nose or these faded-out eyes, or this great sprawling mouth."

"There, there," said Delia comfortably, "I suppose the nose will grow longer in time, and when you stop crying and decide to be happy those eyes will do very well; and since the mouth is a good big one, 'tis well the teeth are so neat and even. If I was you I'd not be castin' slurs at me looks. It's only a few, like meself, can have real beauty."

Hale actually laughed, which was exactly what Delia had planned to make her do, by some hook or crook.

"What are ye laughin' at?" demanded Delia after indulging in a merry peal herself. "One would think to hear ye that ye thought I was jokin'!"

She was off again in another gale, glad to find Hale's spirits lightened.

"I must be gone," she said, when the ribbon had been tied and spread according to Hale's directions. "Ye'd better put on a light frock for supper after ye run in the bathroom and wash your face and hands. I'll be ringin' the gong in about twenty minutes."

“She’s a friend in the enemy’s camp,” mused Hale gratefully, as she changed her dress and made herself fresh for the table.

CHAPTER III

GRANDMOTHER

“**A**S prompt as a major,” said Aunt Alice with approval; for Hale stepped into the sitting-room just as Delia was striking the gong in the hallway to call them to supper.

Grandmother Merrill, as frail as a flower and quite as dainty, held out her hand to Hale and kissed her.

“Welcome to Hawthorne, my dear! I hope you are going to be very happy here.”

Hale murmured a “Thank you,” and began to feel that her chances were better than she had supposed them to be. She stood a moment lost in admiration of the dear little Grandmother whom she had never seen before. Then Aunt Alice reminded them of the waiting supper and they went out. Hale quite naturally slipped her arm around her Grand-

mother's waist, just as she used to support her mother.

Grandmother's dining-room was quietly rich in old mahogany; her table was bright with gleaming linen and lustrous silver; and Delia's delicious rolls and cold sliced chicken were satisfying in the extreme.

It was a relief to Hale that she was not expected to talk during this first meal in her new home. Grandmother and Aunt Alice discussed household and neighborhood affairs which had transpired during the latter's absence. Hale listened part of the time, but often she lost the thread of the story in watching Grandmother.

Hale loved all dainty things. She could see that Grandmother was going to be a constant delight. She loved her already, not as a mere relative whom she ought to love on principle, but as a discovery of her own. Her father had told her that her Grandmother's face was like a beautiful cameo, and she could see what he meant. She could see, too, that her father had a close resemblance to his mother, the same straight nose

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and even brow that had descended by inheritance to herself. Grandmother's mouth was sweet and smiling, her hair was as white as snow, but it still curled naturally about her temples and swept smoothly up under the big tortoise-shell comb at her crown.

In the sitting-room after supper Aunt Alice kindled a blaze in the fireplace to cheer the September evening. Grandmother placed a low rocker for Hale and, seating herself in her own comfortable chair on the opposite side of the hearth, picked up her knitting and went quietly to work.

Hale watched, fascinated, as Grandmother's agile fingers slipped stitch after stitch from one shining needle to the other. There was silence, except for the crackle of the maple logs.

Presently Grandmother looked up and smiled into Hale's steady gaze.

"Do you like the fire, dearie?" she asked.

"Oh, the fire! I had forgotten it," confessed Hale. "I was thinking about you, watching you knit. Do you think I could learn?"

“I’m sure you could, dearie; and some day, if you like, I’ll show you. I don’t suppose you want to begin this evening.”

“Oh, yes; I’d love to; but I don’t want to hinder you,” suggested Hale. She was still regarding Grandmother with devouring eyes. What a beautiful head she had! And such dainty hands!

“I’d love to teach you, right now. You shall make the belt for Aunt Alice’s sweater. It is nearly ready for the finishing touches and I shall not have to give up my big needles.”

With careful rapidity, Grandmother cast the white stitches on the needle and started Hale’s fingers on their slow and painful way. It was an intricate bit of manipulation for fingers not accustomed to such work, but Grandmother was a patient teacher who laughed with girlish glee over the queer puckers in Hale’s forehead and the queer crooks in her fingers and thumbs. To make the lesson easier, Hale had drawn up a carpeted hassock close to Grandmother’s feet and the two bent over the work and fell more

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and more in love with each other every minute.

“That’s enough for to-night, girly,” declared Grandmother when Hale had managed to complete three ridges across the three-inch strip. “You mustn’t get over-tired with it because you wouldn’t want to take it up again; and I can’t bear the thought of losing my new pupil so soon.”

“You can’t lose me now, Grandmother. I think it is fun! Do you suppose I could make a whole sweater for myself when I get Aunt Alice’s belt done?”

“Surely you can, dearie. The stitches are the same, and all you need is perseverance to do any piece of work.”

Grandmother went on steadily slipping off stitches, while Hale clasped her knees and gave herself up to the delight of watching her. She rocked slowly back and forth on her hassock, thinking of nothing in particular, but letting the homey feeling of the room and the group sink into her lonely spirit, even as the fire on the hearth warmed through her skin into her flesh.

The constant undercurrent of resentment which had tinged her thoughts from the moment she had learned of what she termed her "exile" was almost forgotten as she gave herself up to the enjoyment of her present surroundings.

It wasn't long before she found herself snuggling down to Grandmother's knee in a content she had not supposed possible. Grandmother folded her knitting and stroked the dark head gently.

"I hope you are not getting sleepy," she said, peeping over to see if Hale's eyes were shut.

"No, I'm not sleepy," said Hale, "just happy. It is funny how different things can be from what we imagine them. I have been sure that coming here was going to be a hard and unhappy experience. Father said it would be nicer than I imagined, but I couldn't believe him. I've been disagreeable inside for a week or so, and I guess this afternoon I spoke it out to Aunt Alice. Did she tell you?" She waited breathlessly.

"No, dear, Aunt Alice said nothing."

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Hale gave vent to a relieved sigh which Grandmother was quick to detect. She reached over and stroked Hale's cheek.

"I can guess a little how you felt, dearie, so no one needs to tell me anything about it. I'll tell you a little of my own experience, so you may see what I mean."

"I'd love that," said Hale, sitting bolt upright.

If Grandmother was going to tell a story, Hale would watch her face while she told it. Grandmother smiled a homey sort of smile and settled back in her chair, as if she, too, would enjoy the tale.

"I must have been two or three years older than you are," she began, "when I first left home to get more schooling. Our little ungraded school had done what it could for me, but so many different teachers had presided over my lessons from term to term that I was about sixteen before I was ready for high school.

"Nothing could have filled me with greater terror than the thought of going to a strange school and facing boys and girls whom I did

not know. I knew they would be younger than I, and perhaps better prepared, and I felt I would rather give up being educated than to face such an ordeal. The thought of a big building in which there were several classrooms confused and frightened me quite as much.

“I dreamed almost every night of something connected with this trial that was in store for me. Sometimes I would be hunting for the room I had to study in, putting my head into one room after another and being laughed at by the children who sat there. Sometimes I would be trying to recite before the class, and getting everything all wrong, again to the accompaniment of that jeering laughter.

“My mother knew how I dreaded to go, but we both knew it was useless to complain to Father. His will was not often crossed in the household, and besides, Mother was very anxious for me to get a broader education than she had had. So it was arranged that I should spend the winter with Mother’s brother and his family in Boston.

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“They had a son, my cousin Arthur, who had been in high school two years and had taken pains to tell me many lurid stories of his experiences. These stories, I found out afterward, were largely fiction. You know my cousin Arthur is still a very clever writer. He practised shamelessly on me.”

Grandmother laughed reminiscently and shook her head over her own gullibility.

“Things were not as bad as I had pictured them, but I was so sure of the unhappy time I was to have that I could not appreciate conditions as I really found them. The young people were kind and friendly, but I was so timid that I feared to make friends. Then, too, I couldn't forget my age. I can look back now and see that I was no larger than some of the fourteen-year-old freshmen, and much better prepared in many ways, but they were so sure of themselves and so chummy with one another that I distrusted myself and suffered agonies in consequence.

“This had its effect upon my lessons, and I did poor work in recitations, though my

written work was fairly good, especially composition. I just loved my composition teacher and it was through her that I had the first great lift out of my slough of despond. I can never be thankful enough that the lesson came to me early in the first term, for it saved me from 'many a foolish notion' that might have spoiled my whole life.

"We had to write a daily theme for Miss Carpenter, and I soon acquired the habit of picking up a subject on the way home from school, thinking it over in just the words I meant to use, and writing it out as soon as I began to prepare my lessons.

"One day in late September I had to wait at a crossing rather longer than usual for a stream of traffic to pass. While I waited I saw at a florist's booth on the sidewalk a huge bunch of mignonette which reminded me of my mother's garden and brought quick tears to my eyes. Then, before they had time to fall, I brushed them away and stared in wonder; for over that mignonette hovered a real live bee. That brought back the orchard and

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the beehives and all the sweep of country that I loved so much at home, and the tears welled up again and overflowed.

“I turned and hurried on, crowding back the tears. These city people that I hated so should not see me cry! At home, I left my lunch untasted and climbed to my little room at the top of the house, where my one window looked out over ugly flat roofs and brick pavements. How I hated the sight of them!

“When I had had my cry out on the bed, I straightened up my tousled self and started to do my home work. Then I woke to the fact that I had failed to pick up a subject for my theme. I moped around and wasted an hour before it came to me that the bee would have to serve. Then, strangely enough, the words came tumbling over one another and when I had written them down I found they were in verse. I have forgotten them now, as I saved no copy, so all I can remember is the first line of each stanza and the last.”

“What were they?” asked Hale, in breathless eagerness.

Grandmother patted her hands softly and smiled happily into her upturned face.

“The first line of each stanza was,

“ ‘O bee, from the farm you have strayed far
away,’

and the last line of each,

“ ‘And the bee replied, “Hush! I am gathering
honey.” ’ ”

“The verses between were filled with questionings why the bee, who could do as he pleased, should choose to leave the country where everything was beautiful and bountiful, and come to a city where nothing was pleasant or nice.

“Of course, the verses were not good poetry, but Miss Carpenter saw in them something which she could use to help me, and she used it. She kept me after class the next day and asked me to read the verses to her. When I had done so, she looked at me steadily and said, ‘It is strange, my dear, that you yourself should write the very thought I have been trying to find for you.’

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“I couldn’t imagine what she meant, but she went on to explain. ‘I have been watching you these few weeks and I have seen that you are not happy here. I think you need just your own verses to make you see a rift in your clouds. The bee in the city street is finding his honey just as surely as if he were back on his native meadows. Can’t you do the same? Instead of worrying about the things you don’t like, bumping your head into brick walls, so to speak, why not look for the honey that’s to be had even on city streets? I know the girls here want to be friendly and I know they want to share their good times with you. There is honey for you all about, if you’ll only go straight to it as the bee did.’ ”

Hale shifted her glance to the fire as the lesson for herself began to dawn upon her. Grandmother pressed her hands a little tighter over the girl’s folded ones and went on gently.

“I can’t tell you how much good that little talk did me, Hale; and I’m passing it on to you because I know you will use it, too. You

will find your honey in every situation of life if you look for it. I want you to be a wise little bee and go straight to the best things in life. Our life here will be different from what you are used to, but it is a life you want to know about. It will round you out and make you more of a woman than if you knew only city life."

Hale's eyes were bright with tears as she turned them back to Grandmother.

"You are perfectly darling!" she said soberly, "and I shall try to be sensible about it. With you to fly to for help, I ought to get along pretty well."

"You will," declared Grandmother, with conviction. "I can see you will make no half-way work of your life."

Before they could say more the door-bell rang and, without waiting for Delia to answer it from the kitchen, the outside door was flung open. Against the darkness of the night, Hale caught her first glimpse of her cousin, Forest Hammond.

CHAPTER IV

FOREST

FOREST was tall and handsome and decidedly well-groomed. Hale ran her eye rapidly over his face and figure, noting his lustrous brown eyes with their long lashes and heavy brows, his crisp upstanding hair, the fresh color in his clear cheeks, and the flash of white teeth as he called out a greeting to Grandmother. As Grandmother rose to meet him and he bent to kiss her with easy grace, Hale admitted to herself that he was far ahead of her ideas of a country cousin.

His approval seemed equally sincere, for, a moment later, his hand-clasp was firm and cordial, and he said,

“How nice to have you here for all the winter!”

Hale thanked him as best she could and

they all sat down before the fire. Aunt Alice, who had been copying household accounts, closed her books and came to join them with a piece of needlework.

“How are all the folks at your house?” inquired Grandmother as she resumed her knitting.

In the conversation which followed, Hale took little part, but she was an eager listener. Many of the questions which her father could not answer and which she had not ventured to ask Aunt Alice were answered for her. Her father had been right about the ages of Aunt Nan’s children, so Hale really had a cousin about her own age, besides this very splendid young man.

Roy had been frankly curious to see the new cousin, Forest told them. He had planned to come this very evening, but his father had restrained him because of a little job that must be finished before Sunday. Of course, Roy had had all the week to do the work, stacking some firewood, but he had procrastinated as usual. No doubt he would be over before church in the morning.

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"Tell him to come to breakfast," suggested Grandmother.

As they talked about many things, Hale began to wonder what this splendid cousin of hers busied himself about, yet she did not like to ask. She was glad, then, when the conversation drifted back to personal affairs and Grandmother asked how his classes were getting along.

"I have my time all full, except the one hour a week I have been saving for Hale. I might have filled that, too, if I had not promised you I'd save it till Hale came. With my conservatory lesson once a week and six hours a day for my own practice, I'm as busy as a bee when the clover is in bloom."

Grandmother smiled down at Hale and lifted a threatening finger.

"You see what we have planned for you!" she said. "Forest has promised to give you piano lessons. Would that interest you?"

"Oh, yes; I have already taken a few lessons."

"Perhaps we might settle on a time for the lessons," suggested Forest, whipping out a

note-book in a businesslike way that impressed Hale with a sense of his importance.

They decided upon Wednesdays at four o'clock.

"Let's have some music now, if you feel like it," said Grandmother. Aunt Alice led the way across the hall and turned on the lights in the parlor.

Hale thought the room was lovely. It extended the whole depth of the house, which made it twice as long as the sitting-room; yet, being low-studded, it had a cozy air. The furniture was old mahogany, even to the grand piano which filled the space between the windows. The windows were draped in Brussels net. The electric lights were clever imitations of candles in brackets on either side of the big mirror on the chimney and at convenient locations along the walls.

Hale could hardly keep from exclaiming aloud. She gave vent to her pleasure by a hard squeeze on Grandmother's hand, which she was holding at the moment. Grandmother squeezed back in sympathetic under-

standing. Hale felt sure she, too, was thinking of the bee and the honey.

When Forest sat down at the piano Hale forgot all else. He ran a few arpeggios up and down and then broke into a lovely Hungarian dance. Grandmother sat where she could watch his face, Aunt Alice hung over the piano and never took her eyes from his flying fingers, but Hale dropped upon a convenient chair and hugged herself to keep from dancing. She watched her cousin's hands, and his face, and his figure; then she watched Grandmother and Aunt Alice and saw them both in rapt attention.

Presently the dance was finished and Forest dropped quietly into a plaintive searching song without words that made Hale grip herself even tighter and swallow a lump in her throat. After that, there were other themes in rich variety, through all of which the little audience sat speechless, and Forest seemed oblivious of their presence.

When he had played to the end of his fancy, he turned to Hale.

"You play something now," said he.

“Oh! I couldn’t. I wouldn’t for anything, after that.”

“Nonsense!” laughed Forest. “Of course you will. I’m not a bit critical, except when I’m teaching.”

Hale was not to be persuaded. She had learned to play a little, but she blushed to think of her labored efforts beside his easy perfection.

“Then will you play an accompaniment for a violin solo?” he begged.

Hale was about to decline, but she caught a glance from Grandmother which made her think of the bee and the honey. Perhaps this was one of her good things in life. She rose and went to the piano.

They found a folio of very simple music that Hale could read, and she performed better than she had feared. It would not do to disappoint Forest or Grandmother, so she gave herself assiduously to the work and surprised herself by her ability to keep up with the violin.

Forest’s comment at the close of their little program gave her a thrill of delight.

“You have the making of a good accompanist,” he assured her.

When he had gone and Grandmother discovered how late it was, she suggested bed for all of them. It was, however, a long time before Hale composed herself to sleep. The good cry she had promised herself was wholly forgotten. Instead of it, she hummed snatches of Forest's music as she prepared for bed; and long after the house was dark and still she continued to picture him as he sat at the keyboard and drew out gladness and sorrow as the humor of the moment seized him.

“Music lessons and knitting lessons and school,” she mused as she dropped off to sleep. “I wonder if Roy will be as nice as Forest?”

CHAPTER V

ROY

THAT little remark of Grandmother's about having Roy in for breakfast on Sunday morning did not go unnoticed.

Roy's disgust at being forced to complete his procrastinated chore was the more ardent because he had promised himself all the week that he would see his new cousin at once. Roy was, as Forest had said, decidedly curious to meet Hale, which was the very reason that his father selected that particular occasion to drive home the lesson of neglected tasks.

Forest played the part of a good brother and earned Roy's everlasting gratitude by waking him out of a sound sleep to repeat Grandmother's invitation.

"Bully for Grandmother," said Roy, pop-

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ping his eyes wide open. "I'll be there as sure as doomsday."

Thinking it over before he dropped off again, he wondered if it might not be the safest course to get away before the family was astir, on the theory that you never can tell when your father or your mother will put on their specs and discover some job that you ought to have done last week and didn't do.

Thus it happened that a tallish lad of fourteen, with a slight tendency to stoop, crept quietly down the back stairs and out through the kitchen that Sunday morning, stopping on the doorstep to put on the shoes he carried in his hand.

His thick chestnut hair had very evidently missed connections with his brush, and truth compels the further fact that his face had not touched water. Perhaps at so early an hour such points ought to be overlooked. In Roy's mind they certainly held very little place. His merry brown eyes were just as bright and his freckled face just as rosy as if all the minute details had been carefully attended to.

He puckered his lips for a moment, and

though the whistle he emitted was only a faint breath, for the sake of caution, it was enough to call to his feet a shaggy brown dog, neither collie nor English sheep but something between the two, who jumped in delight to signify his willingness to be a partner in whatever plan Roy might be considering.

Together they went on the leap and the jump through the village and up the hill to Grandmother's house. As Roy had expected, the house was closed and quiet, so he and Ted made themselves at home on the porch steps and waited till Delia came and opened the front door to let in the fresh air.

"Hello, Delia," said Roy, hopping up.
"Where's Hale?"

"She's abed and asleep. Where would the boy suppose she'd be?" laughed Delia.
"Think of coming to call on a young lady at this time o' the morn."

"Rats! Delia; she isn't a young lady. Is she any bigger 'n me? Say!"

"No, to be honest with you, she's a good bit smaller, I'll be bound."

"Say, couldn't you go and wake her up and

tell her to come on out and see a fellow?"

"Hear the lad! What would Miss Alice say to that! Run along home and come over like a gentleman this afternoon."

"No, sir!" Roy declined with emphasis. "Grandmother invited me to breakfast and I'm going to stay."

"Oh, is that how it stands?" grinned Delia. "Then it behooves me to cook up an extra dish o' mush. Be quiet, you and your beast, for the ladies won't be wantin' to get up till quite a while yet."

Delia was not surprised to see him stroll around the house presently and take up his position on the back steps.

"I suppose ye think I don't know what ye're there for," she said, coming out to him with a huge square of gingerbread. "Give a few scraps to the dog just for politeness' sake, and don't let me hear another word out o' ye."

In spite of this injunction, the sharing of the lunch between boy and dog was a noisy process. Ted spoke aloud for every bit he

received and more than once Delia admonished them through the window, urging quiet.

None of them saw a little girl in a blue kimono creep to the window overlooking the ell and stand there looking down on the boy and the dog. Hale's sleep had been rudely broken by the sharp demands of Ted, and guessing that Roy might be down there she decided to get up and see.

The picture pleased her very much. Roy, his cap on the back of his head and his eyes shining happily, was holding up his last piece of the cake just out of Ted's reach. The dog was standing on his hind legs, with forepaws braced against Roy's knees, reaching as high as he could for the bite. Of course, a sharp bark was the natural result, and the morsel quickly disappeared into Ted's insatiable mouth.

Hale lingered at the window to watch the rough-and-tumble frolic which followed. It was hard to say which was the more graceful and agile, the boy or the dog, as they leaped and ducked, dodged and scampered. The girl's blood beat faster just to watch the gay

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scrimmage, and when the romp took them out of her sight around the corner of the house she decided to get dressed at once and find them.

“Yes, darlin’, they’re out there somewhere; you’ll find them,” said Delia. “Go on.”

So Hale found them, down by the road, where Ted fancied he had “treed” a squirrel. He was barking furiously up into a walnut-tree against which one foot was braced while the other hung in an inquiring attitude, like a tilted question-mark. Roy, egging him on to believe that the squirrel would drop down to him if he only barked loudly enough, did not at first see Hale. When he discovered that she was near, he clapped his hands and ran to meet her. Ted, also, forgot his quarry and came to inspect her.

“Are you Hale?” asked the boy, not quite knowing how to begin, and a bit confused as to whether a handshake would be proper for a little girl cousin.

“Yes, and are you Roy?” she answered, putting out her hand.

Roy shook it awkwardly and they both felt the embarrassment of not knowing what to say next.

Ted, however, was seldom afflicted that way. He had decided to take Hale for a friend and signified his intention by licking her hand. The jump of surprise and the laughing explanation which followed this act cleared the air wonderfully and blew away all traces of stiffness between them. Roy began to talk of the dog and put him through his tricks, which, though nothing very wonderful, were highly suitable for the present occasion.

He could shake hands, play dead, roll over, bring back sticks that were thrown, and leap into the air to catch a stick tossed straight up.

Hale had to be initiated into the proper form of address to bring forth each trick. When he brought back to her the stick she had thrown, she tried to get it from him to throw again.

“Bring it here,” she said. But Ted only looked at her with watchful eyes and repeatedly dodged her attempts to take it from his mouth.

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"That's not the way, Hale," Roy informed her. "He will drop it only when you say certain special words. Now look! Drop it, Ted," he said quietly.

The sly cunning in Ted's eyes changed to a friendly softness as he trotted straight up to Roy and, laying the stick at his feet, tossed his head up and down in eager appeal to the boy to throw it again.

"How wise he is!" cried Hale.

Probably in all Hale's life she had never before approached her breakfast with such a ravenous appetite. It had been no uncommon thing for her to have breakfast in bed. The ruling theory of her life, due to constant repetition by her family, was that she was a delicate child and must save her strength so that she would not be an invalid like her mother. If, then, she felt a little tired or lazy on waking in the morning, she had only to say so and breakfast was brought to her. In case she went to the dining-room for it, she always went right from her own room, and frequently not till her father and Miss Dwight had finished. The solitary meal was

not much more than tasted, greatly to the distress of Maude, the pretty little dining-room girl, who tried to coax her to eat more. Never before had Hale romped with a boy and a dog before breakfast; yet she took to it naturally enough.

When Delia called them they were down at the end of the orchard where Ted, spying some sign of life in the grass, had led them to investigate. Of course their shoes were wet with dew and their hands smeared and sticky from constantly handling the sticks for Ted. Delia straightened them out in about three minutes.

“Hale, my girl, run up-stairs and put on your slippers, then smooth up your hair and wash your hands. I’ll get this boy clean in about a minute, for there’ll be trouble if ye’re either of ye late at table.”

Roy was glad that Hale was not there to see by what drastic measures Delia fulfilled her promise in regard to himself. First she made him take off his boots and put on a pair of her own carpet slippers, kept in a handy bag behind the washroom door for

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days when her shoes seemed too small. The scrubbing which was then administered to his grimy paws was not the first of its kind that she had given Roy.

“Ouch there, Deel! I say! don’t hold me so tight! That hurts!”

“Stand up here then, you young eel, and don’t pull away till I say they’re clean. It’s your own fault. Come now, we have to be in a hurry. Quit laughin’,” cautioned Delia, poking his head down over a fresh bowl of water and giving it such a ducking as Roy was not likely to serve himself with.

“Hi there! Quit! Say, I’ll wash my face and do it well, too.”

“All right,” agreed Delia, the more willingly because at that very moment a bell rang to signify that Miss Merrill and her mother were at the table ready for Delia to bring in the cereal.

Roy knew what that bell meant; he had heard it before when he had been in precisely similar predicaments; but as on other occasions he had usually succeeded in getting there by the skin of his teeth, so now he man-

aged to dry his hands and face, at least partially, and fly to the washroom for a few strokes of the brush over his tawny mop, while Delia was transferring the mush from the fireless cooker to the serving-dish.

He squeezed into the dining-room just ahead of her, and said "Good morning" over the back of his chair even as Hale appeared from the hall and made a dash for hers.

Grandmother held out a hand to clasp his for a moment after they sat down, and smiled in a comically resigned way to find it still damp. Aunt Alice caught the glance and she, also, looked resigned, but not comically so.

"It's a wonder he's presentable at all," she said, in a tone which Hale interpreted to mean that she would rather enjoy it if there could be found some excuse for sending him away. "What were you doing down there in the orchard? It looked to me as if Ted was digging a hole."

"It wasn't a new hole, Aunt Alice. There was a hole already there, a woodchuck-hole, I guess; and Ted was trying to make it large enough to root out the little beast. Gee! did

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you see him dig? The dirt just flew in all directions!"

"Don't say 'gee,' Roy!" cautioned Aunt Alice.

"Excuse me," murmured Roy and applied himself with great vigor to his mush.

"Don't eat so fast, and don't spatter that way. Take up just enough so it won't overflow the spoon."

"'S 'm."

Roy moderated his speed and did his best to keep himself within the limits of Aunt Alice's code as he understood it. Grandmother came to his rescue with questions of home and school and drew Hale into the conversation as well.

After breakfast there was a question of church. Hale was going with Grandmother and Aunt Alice, so she learned.

"I'll have to go home and change my clothes if I go," said Roy.

"Run along then," suggested Aunt Alice; "you'll have just about time enough."

So Roy whistled for Ted and went racing with him down the hill, while Hale watched

from the porch and waved her hand when Roy turned to wave his before he struck into the main road.

CHAPTER VI

GETTING ADJUSTED

ON Monday morning Hale woke feeling tired and listless. The unusual excitement of Saturday and Sunday was, she felt, reason enough for her languid feelings.

Sunday had been a busy day, beginning with Roy's visit, followed by church service and a family dinner at her cousin's, where she met Uncle Henry and Aunt Nan for the first time.

Uncle Henry was, certainly, most unlike her father. It made her homesick afresh to compare the two. He was quiet, almost gloomy, throughout the dinner, speaking only to answer direct questions, or to correct Roy's not too modest table manners. He listened to the conversation with a critical meditative expression, as if he could vastly improve its value if he chose to open his mouth, if he

thought it worth while to exert himself that much.

Hale wondered if Roy could possibly love him the way she loved her father. How it was possible she could not imagine. For her part, he froze her to the core; she couldn't think of much else but the bare fact of his presence at first. Roy didn't seem to be noticeably in awe of him, even when his table manners were overhauled.

Aunt Nan was a cheerful, hospitable soul, who laughed a great deal and put Hale at ease whenever she spoke to her. She had a delightful way of drawing her into the conversation every now and then, if only by a friendly "me-to-you" smile that reminded Hale of her father.

Hale tried to keep her attention fixed on Aunt Nan, though it was frequently interrupted by Roy, who poked her to make her listen to some remark of his or to show her how he could balance his knife on his napkin ring. As such nudgings invariably directed the reproving glance of his father on them both, Hale found them uncomfortable atten-

tions and tried to avoid answering them; but Roy was irrepressible and the strain of the situation wearied Hale.

She was glad when they got away from the table and could move and speak apart from the critical silence of her uncle. Roy had hoards of treasures to show her. These he kept in a room irreverently called the "Scrap-heap" by other members of the family, because the value of its contents was as nothing in their eyes. Roy, on the contrary, set a high value on every separate contraption and would discard none of them.

When he enticed Hale up-stairs to his retreat and started upon an explanation of the several "inventions" that he had made, it was an afternoon's occupation. He made it exceedingly interesting, though Hale knew nothing of mechanical things. She listened sympathetically and was truly sorry when he came, as he repeatedly did, to the same sad ending, "but somehow I can't make it work yet."

When Grandmother and Aunt Alice decided

it was time to go home, Hale was pretty well tired out and glad to go to bed early.

Waking up tired, she tried to sleep again, but instead she lay thinking over yesterday's experiences.

Presently Aunt Alice came to her door.

"Are you awake, Hale?"

"Yes," she answered.

She heard her aunt go down-stairs, but decided it wasn't necessary to get up yet. The bed felt very good, so she stretched luxuriously and gave herself up to the enjoyment of it. The next thing she realized, she was opening her eyes at the sound of the gong in the lower hall.

"Can that be breakfast!" she asked herself sleepily.

A glance at her watch assured her that it was, so she reluctantly rolled out of bed.

Dressing was a leisurely ceremony with Hale always; and this was a lazy feeling morning. Moreover, she found it confusing to realize that the whole problem of what to wear now depended upon herself. At home,

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Miss Dwight would have had her dress laid out, with a fresh collar basted in. The button she tore off her shoe last night would have been replaced as if by magic and when all was in readiness Hale would have been called and asked to decide whether she wished to breakfast in bed or in the dining-room. Until this new order of living had crossed her path, she had never considered any other arrangement possible; but she was learning by practical demonstration that her aunt did not intend to assume any responsibility regarding her personal care.

She was, this morning, to receive still further enlightenment on the subject of what her aunt expected of her.

Descended to the dining-room, she was astonished to find the table cleared and no one in sight. Opening the door into the kitchen, she found Delia washing jelly tumblers which Aunt Alice had brought up from the cellar.

“Where’s my breakfast, Delia?” she asked, glancing toward the stove where she fully expected to see it awaiting her in the warming closet.

At that moment Aunt Alice appeared from the cellar with another basket of tumblers. She answered for Delia.

“There are some muffins in the pantry on a plate, and you may use that butter,” pointing to a few scraps on a saucer. “Sit down over there by the window.”

Hale found the muffins and took up the saucer of butter, which she thought wasn't half enough. She found, also, that the muffins were left over from yesterday's baking and were rather harder than she liked.

When Aunt Alice had gone from the room, she ventured to question Delia.

“Was this all they had for their breakfast?”

“No; they had melons, and boiled eggs, and batter-cakes with maple sirup, besides coffee.”

“Why can't I have some of those things?” asked Hale in an injured tone.

“That was Miss Alice's orders,” Delia said; “bread and butter for late comers.”

Hale's impulse was to make a protest. She would certainly have done so at home, but her

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company manners came to her rescue and she swallowed her indignation along with a dry crust of muffin and washed them both down with a drink of water. Then consulting the little watch on her wrist, she decided it was time to start for her first day of school in Hawthorne. Roy had promised to meet her at eight-thirty and it was close to that now.

It was not a very happy Hale who went through the hall to find her hat. She was not even in a mood to step into the sitting-room to see if Grandmother was there; but she met her on the porch taking her morning cup of air. Hale smiled faintly through her gloom. Grandmother tried to soothe her with a kiss.

"I'm sorry it happened this way; but Aunt Alice is very particular about the day's program," she said sympathetically. "You'll soon learn to fall in with the routine, I'm sure."

Hale brushed away a tear or two and hurried off.

Aunt Alice evidently considered the lesson sufficient without comment, for she never re-

ferred to it in any way; and for that Hale was grateful. She soon learned to hop out of bed at the first call and begin her dressing. The bread-and-butter reminder did not have to be used again, though there were several narrow escapes. Once after struggling with her hair longer than usual, she found herself belated and slipped into her kimono. Her appearance in that attire was greeted by strong disapproval.

“Not in that garb, Hale!” said Aunt Alice, sternly. “We don’t come to the table in negligée and I can’t allow you to. Don’t let me speak of it again.”

Hale returned to her room and put on her dress, deeply resenting what she called being “cornered.” Aunt Alice had a way of prohibiting all courses of action except the one she wished to have followed. There was nothing for it but to become as methodical and precise as the lady herself, to keep peace in the family. Hale wanted to scream at the very idea. Everything must be done at a definite time and in a definite way; which was contrary to Hale’s easy-going fashion.

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Her one consolation was that Grandmother was there to smooth her ruffled feelings. While never openly criticizing Aunt Alice's methods, she silently gave her the sympathy she needed, or dropped a quiet hint about the sweetening powers of honey.

CHAPTER VII

SCHOOL

A CLASSROOM full of children her own age was a thing Hale had never seen until that Monday morning in Hawthorne when she met Roy at the corner and went with him through the noisy school yard and up to Mr. Stickney's office.

The high school, which was in the same building with the grades, opened its sessions half an hour earlier than they. It happened on this important day that Roy and Hale came in just as Mr. Stickney was leaving his office to go across the hall to the assembly room where the entire high school was waiting for him to open the session with devotional exercises.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he said, motioning to the couch; "sit down, both of you."

As they waited, Hale grew more and more

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nervous over the ordeal that awaited her. Roy was in his usual good spirits and did his best to cheer her up.

"Look pleasant, please," he said, pulling his cap over his face and tunneling one hand to his eye while he snapped the fingers of his free hand.

"Don't be ridiculous, Roy!" she laughed.

"That's fine," he continued; "now lift the chin a little and throw out the chest. Now, just that way till the little birdie comes out of the box."

"Roy, stop! I'm so nervous, I'll get to laughing and won't be able to stop. What's that!"

"Gee! but you *are* nervous," he said, sitting down beside her and twirling his cap on his index finger. "That's only the high school saying the Lord's Prayer. He'll be back in a minute now."

Hale's inflated courage collapsed like a punctured balloon as she heard the returning steps. Mr. Stickney put his hand on Roy's head and shook it familiarly.

"Well, Mr. Hammond! what's the story?"

"This is my cousin, Hale Merrill," said Roy. "She's going to live here this winter and she doesn't know where she belongs in school, because she never went before."

"All right, young man. You sit down here and wait for her, so when we find out you can take her there. Now then; Hale, did you say?"

Mr. Stickney motioned her to a chair at the long table and placed a card before her.

"Suppose you write it for me."

"What, sir?" asked Hale, slightly confused.

"Your name, please, on this line."

Hale wrote it, and several other things, such as her address and her age, her father's name and occupation. There was nothing very hard about that.

Presently she had to answer some questions and that was not so easy. Sometimes it was rather funny, as when Mr. Stickney asked her how far along in the arithmetic she had studied. Of course, she meant to say "Proportions," but when she said "Prepositions," Mr. Stickney raised his eyebrows question-

ingly, and Hale was sure she heard a stifled giggle from the couch.

Mr. Stickney tactfully turned the answer to good account by saying, "Then you know the parts of speech?" and Hale was glad she could answer, "Yes."

"It seems that you belong in the ninth grade, so I'll place you there to begin with. If after a week or so you find that you have had the work, you can try an examination for the high school."

Hale gasped. "Oh, I know I am not ready for high school," she hastened to assure him.

Mr. Stickney found this was true on the whole, for while she was above the average ninth-grade child in reading and history and composition, she was surprisingly below the standards in grammar and arithmetic.

"That will adjust itself satisfactorily, I am sure," he said kindly. "On second thought, Roy, I guess I'll take Hale down to Miss Marsh's room. I have an errand there. You may run out now."

Hale's quick sensibility told her that Mr. Stickney had kept Roy with them only that

she might not feel the strangeness of her new surroundings. Her admiration of him dated from that minute.

She would have been even more grateful if she could have heard what he said to Miss Marsh as the two stepped out into the hall after Hale had been assigned a seat in the otherwise empty classroom. She would have understood why it was a full week before Miss Marsh called her to her feet before the class.

Those first few days were trying enough, even with the way made smooth in places where Mr. Stickney could do it. The hard wooden seat and narrow quarters of a school desk were tortures for which Hale had no previous training. How she longed for the cushioned window-seat in the library at home where she and Miss Dwight had read and studied! The close air made her head feel queer, and the strange boys and girls so near made her afraid to lift her eyes from her book.

She was interested in them individually; it was only in the mass that they oppressed her. Surely there was nothing awesome about

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queer little Charlie Thresher, who never studied if he could avoid it, and who, in the shelter of his desk, was forever folding paper strips into Jacob's-ladder spirals. Hale watched him play with these in various ways. The wide ones were, in his imagination, accordions which he pulled back and forth, the tiny ones were caterpillars which he poked along on the desk.

Such a funny little monkey Hale had never seen before. If Miss Marsh patiently or impatiently reminded him of his work, Charlie hustled the whole lot into his desk and made a great show of injured innocence. As soon as her attention was directed elsewhere Charlie had the outfit in operation again, glancing slyly across the aisle to make sure that Hale was taking note of his indifference to correction.

Marion Shedd, who sat in the back seat, could draw pictures almost as fast as Charlie could make paper ladders. These she labeled with queer names and laid them on selected desks as she passed up and down the aisle collecting or passing the lesson-papers.

Martha Holmes, Hale's left-hand neighbor, nearly always had a bag of candy which gained her many friends. Hale saw that certain people were favored, but never quite understood the system till one morning toward the end of the week she saw a piece of paper held low across the aisle toward her. The paper was scooped to prevent the escape of a large chocolate drop, and across the top was written, "Do me the second example." So that was it! Hale made short work of the candy and copied the example from her own paper, passing it back in the same cautious way.

Between Clara Grant, who sat behind Charlie Thresher, and Henry Nelson, who sat in front of Martha Holmes, a brisk flirtation was in progress which involved the passing of numerous notes. Hale lent herself graciously to the important rôle of letter-carrier when she found it was expected of her. She became quite adept at choosing her moments for the delivery of Cupid's mail and very quick at passing the sentimental messages. She looked upon it as part of her education

as a public-school child and was anxious to do anything to show her friendly spirit.

Gradually the strangeness wore off, till Hale dared to look abroad upon the whole class and feel herself a part of it. She spent much time in studying Miss Marsh. It seemed to her that she had never seen a less interesting person. Miss Marsh's broad, square face wore always the same expression, varied on rare occasions by a frown if things went wrong, but not very often by a smile.

Hale tried to penetrate the meaning of that face. She imitated its expression as best she could, and tried to read the feeling that came to her as a result.

"I have it," she said at last; "it's a cow! just dull and contented like a cow chewing her cud. No wonder the lessons are the same thing over and over. If she'd ever move out of her chair you might hope for a bit of change."

Miss Marsh was a landmark in the Hawthorne school. She had taught the fathers and mothers of some of the children in Hale's class. Her methods of teaching were con-

sidered good in their day; that is, she kept good order in her classes and caused her pupils to memorize the year's work. Rules for arithmetical operations were her chief delight, with history dates a close second. Capitals and largest cities, with the principal products of each state or country, were her idea of geography essentials.

While other teachers might anticipate with dread the periodical visits of the committeeman who should examine their classes on a term's work, Miss Marsh went placidly on her way, confident that her pupils would make a creditable showing.

She had extended no welcoming hand to the changes that had come gradually into methods of teaching. New-fangled notions were, she felt sure, merely fads and they would not show results like the old reliable methods.

"I have all I can do, as it is, to cover the year's work without trying any new dodges," she would say.

Many principals had come and gone during Miss Marsh's reign in the ninth-grade room, because Hawthorne was a good stepping-

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stone for ambitious young principals. Each in turn had lifted inquiring eyebrows upon hearing her answer, and that always ended the matter. Of course, Miss Marsh was an excellent teacher—most excellent—and her methods must not be questioned to the point of hurting her feelings. One could only suggest.

Mr. Stickney, who was particularly alive to the needs of young people, shrugged his shoulders visibly on his way back to his office after a visit in the ninth-grade room.

“Dull,” he said to himself, “deadly dull! but what can you do! An excellent teacher, no doubt, but lacking in imagination.”

So Miss Marsh's classes continued to be well-ordered mechanical units who learned facts and recited them to their teacher's entire satisfaction.

CHAPTER VIII

A SENSATION

THE dullness of the afternoons in the ninth-grade room was an experience to be dreaded and lived through by forgetting it, if possible.

In the first place, Miss Marsh always came back from her lunch feeling sleepy and dull. Hale knew this even before she overheard her tell Miss Blair of the eighth grade that she always wanted a nap after lunch more than she wanted anything else.

In the second place, the sun was always around on the other side of the building and the room often grew too dark for comfort before closing time.

Added to these was the fact that Miss Marsh had no interest in the afternoon subjects and made no attempt to vary them or make them interesting. Somewhere in the course of her training Miss Marsh must have

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been advised to arrange her program in such a way that subjects requiring least mental strain should be studied in the afternoon. So be it! Miss Marsh decided in favor of reading, writing, and English, which Hale found was sometimes grammar and sometimes the writing of compositions.

So far, so good; but Miss Marsh had evidently interpreted the formula about mental strain to mean that she herself was to make no effort.

She gave out a reading-lesson something like this: "We will read to-day on page ninety-one, I guess; yes, that's a good lesson for to-day"; as if she had never thought of it before. When it came to the recitation, Hale thought she never could stand it. One pupil would read one paragraph, in almost any fashion so long as he called the words correctly, and Miss Marsh would give a dull assent and pass on to the next.

Not so had the lessons on the cushioned window-seat progressed under Miss Dwight's careful ear. How homesick Hale used to get for her mother and Miss Dwight while nearly

falling asleep trying to follow the monotonous drone. She tried to comfort herself with the hope that once she began to take her part in the recitations things might look brighter.

Miss Marsh, being a very literal person, had taken Mr. Stickney at his word. He had said it might be best not to ask Hale for a recitation for a week or so, unless she volunteered one. The week was a simple matter, but the "or so" gave Miss Marsh some trouble. Having given it careful consideration, she decided that "or so" might mean less than a week or it might mean more, but to be on the safe side she would wait till Wednesday.

On Wednesday afternoon, then, of Hale's second week, in the midst of the sleepy ceremony called the reading-lesson, Hale heard her name spoken and realized that she was expected to read the next paragraph.

The lesson was a selection from "Ivanhoe," that passage which records the test of archery between the outlaw who names himself Locksley and the forester Hubert.

In Hale's mind the words had painted a

vivid picture in days gone by. "Ivanhoe" had been a favorite tale with herself and Miss Dwight. How often they had read its dramatic pages and reveled in its musical language, no part of it more musical and dramatic than the yeomen's contest at archery!

She could shut her eyes and see it all—the shady lane all grass-grown under its arch of trees, the target at one end and the archers at the other, while lining the passage on either side stood the yeomen watching the shots. With them, watching breathlessly, Hale always saw a little girl, herself, standing well to the front and close up to the target, oh, perilously close, to see how fell the arrows.

So here she was again to-day! Hubert had shot so carefully, and his arrow had alighted within the inner ring but not exactly in the center. Then Locksley, the picturesque outlaw in his Lincoln green, had shot so carelessly and yet so much better than the forester; which made Prince John urge greater care.

Just here it was that Hale, all eager to see

the next shot go by, heard her name called, and found herself not in the green lane at the lists, but in the class-room at the Hawthorne school and called upon for the first time in her life to read before the class.

She sprang eagerly to her feet and, glancing at her book about as carelessly as Locksley had glanced at his target, she read straight at Miss Marsh.

“ ‘Hubert had but one set speech for all occasions.’ ”

Another glance at the book.

“ ‘An your highness were to hang me,’ he said, ‘a man can but do his best.’ ”

Another glance.

“ ‘Nevertheless, my grandsire drew a good bow’—”

So bright and earnest was the tone as Hale began her reading that Miss Marsh involuntarily looked up and, finding Hale’s eyes fixed upon her and the book a secondary affair, she continued to look and listen, and so lost her place and let the end of the paragraph slip by without realizing it.

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Unhindered then, Hale launched into Prince John's impatient rejoinder and read it through.

“ ‘The foul fiend on thy grandsire and all his generation,’ interrupted John; ‘shoot, knave, and shoot thy best, or it shall be the worse for thee!’ ”

Hale was not a bit surprised to see the change that came over Miss Marsh during the reading of this sentence. She was rather glad that chance had hit upon that stirring bit for her first reading. As she came out strong on “The foul fiend on thy grandsire,” she could see Miss Marsh go white low down upon her cheeks, while a startled look dawned in her eyes and deepened through the command and the threat. It was as if Hale had addressed the words to her teacher, had called her a knave and bade her do her best under penalty of dire punishment.

Seeing the effect of her effort, Hale felt she had done credit to Miss Dwight's instruction, which had been, “Make it real.” Her satisfaction was short-lived, however. The glow of pleasure which warmed her cheeks as she



“‘SHOOT, KNAVE, AND SHOOT THY BEST, OR IT SHALL BE THE WORST FOR THERE!’” — *Page 88.*

sat down in obedience to Miss Marsh's lifted hand burned hotly into a fire of confused shame under an avalanche of laughter that seemed to pour down upon her from the walls and ceiling, and surge up over her from the floor and desks.

The entire class, regardless of Miss Marsh's warning finger and as much by reason of her startled face as from any other cause, had burst into loud derisive laughter. Finding the lifted finger of no avail, Miss Marsh next applied her hand to her desk bell. Three times she struck it before there came any remission, and even then it came in answer to a new presence in the room.

The door had opened and closed very quietly to admit Mr. Stickney, who, passing through the hall and hearing the unwonted sound, had said to himself, "What! laughter? In the ninth-grade room? I'll just step in and see who is sufficiently alive to make Miss Marsh's room laugh."

Meantime, Hale had been sitting in puzzled misery, looking first at Miss Marsh and then at the children nearest her, then down at her

book to see if she had perhaps made some ludicrous mistake in calling a word. She read the sentences over to herself and could find no error. When the fact began to dawn upon her, as it did presently, that they were laughing at her way of reading, she was disgusted with every one of them. Was it—

But the room had suddenly hushed and Mr. Stickney was speaking.

“Do tell me the joke. I haven’t laughed like that for a week and I think it would do me good.”

Miss Marsh, very much flushed from repressed anger and acute embarrassment, began to apologize.

“It was not a laughing matter at all. Really the class should be ashamed.”

Mr. Stickney turned to the class.

“I’m sure it must have been a good joke; who’ll tell?”

Instantly Hale was on her feet, glowing with indignation.

“I’ll tell, Mr. Stickney,” she said hurriedly. “They were laughing at the way I read.”

“Was it a funny way?”

“It was the best I know how to do,—and a great deal better than any one here ever tries to do,” she added hotly.

Mr. Stickney put his hand to his chin and rubbed his thumb along his jaw in a meditative way.

“Will you read it for me like that?” he asked kindly.

“I’ll read it for you, but not before this class,” she told him after a moment’s hesitation.

“Come with me to the office, then.”

Hale picked up her book and darted down the aisle and out the door which Mr. Stickney held open for her to pass, leaving Miss Marsh to settle the class and her own ruffled plumage as well as she could. She did not return to the ninth-grade room that afternoon in time to see Miss Marsh again. She suspected that Mr. Stickney was responsible for this fact, and so he was.

Out in the hallway when they had escaped from the unfriendly atmosphere, he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and said, “I’m on my way to Miss Blair’s room just now;

you run up to the office and wait for me there."

It was nearly closing time before he came. Then she read to him in her very best style the whole of the "Ivanhoe" selection and several others, to all of which he listened very gravely.

"Who taught you to read like that?" he asked her.

"My mother always read to me like that before I knew my letters; and my governess always wanted me to make the story real. She never let me read along just calling the words, as they do—as some people do."

"You are a credit to your mother, Hale, and to your governess, as well. That is real reading and very refreshing to hear. Now the problem is this,—public-school children get to be very much like sheep; they go blundering along in flocks, following somebody's lead. If anything uncommon happens, they are shocked and bewildered. Being savage little humans, they laugh whether it is going to hurt some one's feelings or not."

"They'll never laugh at my reading

again," declared Hale, indignation darkening her eyes, "for I'll read like a ninny-cat, same as they do, and see if that suits them."

Mr. Stickney smiled at her vehemence, even as he shook his head.

"I am sorry to hear you say that," he told her; "for I was just going on to say that I hoped you would be brave enough to keep right on reading the best that you know, because it's what I'd like to hear in every room in this building and from every child."

Hale bit her lip and looked distressed.

"I know it will be hard at first," Mr. Stickney continued, seeing that she needed time to think, "but if it inspired some other child to try harder, you would be glad. I know you don't enjoy hearing the stupid repetition of words that goes by the name of reading."

"No, I don't," said Hale.

"Then, too, don't you owe it to yourself to do the best you can? Don't you owe it to your mother and your governess to fulfill their expectations of you? I think the brave way, the only way that will really satisfy you,

will be to do your best in spite of obstacles.”

Hale sighed.

“I suppose so,” she faltered, “but it made me fighting mad to hear them laugh. I don’t want to try it again, but I suppose I will because Mother would be ashamed to hear me read the way they do.”

“Good!” said Mr. Stickney. “Do you know, Hale, I believe they won’t laugh again. They will know what to expect, so it won’t startle them next time. First thing we know, you will be the leader and all the little blundering human sheep will be following after you.”

Hale smiled faintly, a crooked little smile. Then the sunshine broke through this slight rift and she was herself again.

“It’s just as well I decided that way,” she said, eagerly; “I know I could never stand it to whine along the way they do. I have to play the part of the one I’m reading about and put myself in his place, and do and say what he does in the way he does and says it.”

Carried away by her own eloquence, Hale

glowed with the enthusiasm she had flung about her reading, and her very atmosphere sent a thrill along Mr. Stickney's nerves.

"I see you do, Hale. You would be unhappy trying to do it half-way. Run now and put your book away, and promise me you won't be unforgiving toward those thoughtless classmates of yours."

Hale promised readily enough. Mr. Stickney had put their rudeness in such a light that she found no bitterness in it now.

When she had put her book away in the empty class-room, Hale found Roy waiting for her on the steps.

"I thought you'd never come!" he said. "What d'e say?"

"He said it was all right and nothing to laugh about, and they only laughed because they were surprised and didn't know what else to do. I suppose you know all that. You laughed with the rest."

This was true, but Roy had been hoping Hale didn't know it. He had a boy's natural aversion to seeing a member of his fam-

ily made conspicuous. When Hale had drawn all eyes upon herself, he had blushed uncomfortably, and pretended not to hear when "Race" Wade swooped close to his ear with the whispered epithet, "Some pip-pin." When the storm of laughter broke around him, he had joined it for the very reason Mr. Stickney had given,—because he didn't know what else to do. At the time it seemed to cover his chagrin and clear him from any connection with Hale's performance.

"Yes, I did, but I'm ashamed of it now," he confessed frankly. "Really it was great, Hale, and I wish I could do it that way. Everybody's sorry they laughed at you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I heard them talking after school. They think you are a brick to answer up the way you did. We all wish we could do as well."

"You could if you'd only try," said Hale, as they parted at the corner. "You're all asleep, the whole lot of you. It was nice of you to wait for me, Roy, and tell me what

they said. It makes me feel a lot better; and I thank you."

"'At's all right," shrugged Roy. "I wanted you to know."

CHAPTER IX

A REPRIMAND

THE story of Hale's sensational recitation was not long in reaching the ears of the whole school enrollment, because every one was anxious to hear the cause of the uproar and every one who knew was eager to tell. The tale reached older ears as well.

Miss Merrill, after a round of calls, dropped into the library about five o'clock and heard the news from the librarian.

"I hear you have a lively little lady in your family this fall," said Miss Colburn, as she made out charge slips for Miss Merrill's books.

"What do you mean, Anna?"

"The children have been telling me that Hale—is that her name?—created quite a sensation in school this afternoon. You hadn't heard?" said Anna Colburn, hesitatingly.

"No. Dear me! what did she do?"

“You don’t need to be alarmed, Miss Merrill; it was nothing bad; something very good, I should imagine, only it was unusual and unexpected. It was a reading-lesson, I was told, and Hale read as if she meant business,—like a young actress, according to the children’s tell.”

Miss Merrill winced, and then frowned, while Anna continued.

“It does me good to hear of some one stirring a bit of life into that ninth-grade class. I mulled through a year with Miss Marsh, and I know it wouldn’t take much to cause a sensation; though I suppose it’s heresy to say so. You went to school to her yourself, didn’t you, Miss Merrill?”

Anna looked up from the slips she was sorting, blankly aware that she had displeased Miss Merrill.

“Oh, I beg—” she began; but Miss Merrill was ready to speak.

“Yes, I did go to school to Miss Marsh, and I found her an excellent teacher. I can still remember the rules and history dates she taught me, and I find the knowledge most

useful. It seems that the young people to-day feel called upon to instruct their elders and superiors. I think it's rather presumptuous, to say the least."

Anna Colburn could do no more than watch Miss Merrill gather up her books and take her departure in stiff-backed haste. She could but sit and wonder what she had said to vex Miss Merrill, or whether it was Hale's little escapade that had so stirred her anger. At last she decided it was because she had criticized Miss Merrill's friend Miss Marsh. History dates indeed! Anna locked up the library for the night and went thoughtfully home, promising herself that she would in future refrain from criticizing her elders and superiors, but very far from guessing just where in her remarks lay the barb that rankled in Miss Merrill's heart.

Aunt Alice made it a point never to introduce unpleasant topics of conversation at the table, so she waited till Grandmother and Hale had taken up their knitting by the fire before she broached the subject of Hale's misdemeanor.

Meantime, it had not escaped Grandmother's trained attention that her daughter was troubled about something. An occasional tightening of her lips coupled with the anxious glances furtively directed toward her niece told as plainly as words that her annoyance concerned Hale.

Hale was quieter than usual. She had fallen into a way of bringing Grandmother scraps of information of the day's events, telling them in a droll imitative way that was the cream of the story; for the events in themselves were simple and commonplace enough.

This evening the conversation lagged. Now that it was all over and she knew how Roy and the others thought of it, she would love to tell it to Grandmother and see her laugh over Miss Marsh's dazed regard growing into horrified amazement. Hale knew she could show Grandmother exactly how Miss Marsh had looked, and yet she hesitated. Somehow her talk with Mr. Stickney had made it seem too important to tell as a joke, and there was no special reason, in Hale's opinion, for telling it in any other aspect.

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Her unwonted silence together with Aunt Alice's evident state of mind partially prepared Grandmother for the dialogue which took place between the two when Aunt Alice was ready to speak.

"What is this, Hale, that I hear about your making a disturbance in school this afternoon?"

"I made no disturbance, Aunt Alice. It was the rest of the class that made the noise."

"But you did something out of the ordinary; something that is the talk of the town already. What was it?"

"Dear me!" said Hale, with a show of impatience, "I simply read a paragraph or two in the regular lesson."

"Don't be impatient, Hale. I want to know about this. Tell me what there was about it that should raise such a hue and cry," commanded Aunt Alice in her firm, cold way.

So Hale related the incident, and because it was impossible for her to launch into a story without being dramatic, she had her chance, after all, to make Grandmother smile

over Miss Marsh's horrified countenance.

Aunt Alice's face was not a whit less expressive of displeasure than her teacher's had been.

"Hale, what makes you do such things?" she implored. "It isn't necessary nor nice for you to set yourself up in such a way."

"I didn't set myself up, Aunt Alice."

"Don't contradict! You know it isn't customary for children in school to read as if they were elocutionists."

"I don't know what an elocutionist is, Aunt Alice; but I know Mother and Miss Dwight always expected me to make the story sound real. That's all I was trying to do, and I can't help it if Miss Marsh and her old class are so stupid and dull they just pronounce words and call that reading!"

"Hale!"

"Excuse me, Aunt Alice."

"You must be more respectful to Miss Marsh, or I can't excuse you. I want you to go to her to-morrow morning and ask her pardon and tell her you are sorry for your performance."

Hale gasped.

"But, Aunt Alice," she protested, "I have done nothing to be sorry for. If there is any pardon asked, the class ought to ask mine. It was exceedingly rude of them to laugh as they did, especially as I'm a stranger."

"Don't presume on the fact that you are a stranger to shield you when you misbehave. You must tell Miss Marsh you are sorry for what you did and that hereafter you will make your actions conform to her wishes."

"I can't promise that, if her wishes are that I read the way the others do, because I have already promised Mr. Stickney that whenever I read I shall do my best."

"What do you mean? Mr. Stickney? Has this come to his ears?"

Hale, believing that the little compact in the office was not to be lightly told to a third person, had suppressed that part of the story. It must be told now, she could see. She shuddered inwardly, in the certainty that Aunt Alice would not see the matter sympathetic-

ally, as Mr. Stickney did, and shuddering, plunged into the story.

Aunt Alice, when she had heard her through, drew a deep breath and a long face and said she was surprised that Mr. Stickney should uphold her in such conduct.

“If he sanctions such actions, I suppose my desires will have no weight with you. Perhaps I shouldn’t expect them to, considering who your mother was.”

“My mother!” cried Hale, starting up with eyes ablaze. “What about my mother!”

“Alice,” said Grandmother, in surprise; “aren’t you a little unwise?”

Miss Merrill sat looking defiantly from her mother to her niece. For a moment she seemed about to speak; but checked the impulse, pressed her lips tightly, rose abruptly and left the room.

Hale wheeled toward the fireplace and, dropping to the floor, buried her face in her Grandmother’s lap.

“What does she mean? What does she mean?” she asked between her sobs.

Grandmother stroked Hale's dark abundant hair and clasped her clammy little hands till there was quietness once more.

"A good cry will do you no harm, dearie," she said. "You have been too much excited to-day. The little shower will clear the air."

"What did she mean about my mother?" repeated Hale, with a searching look into Grandmother's kind eyes.

Grandmother returned the look in all honesty and earnestness.

"Nothing which needs to trouble you the least little bit," she answered. "Something of which you may be very glad some day."

Hale thought about this a moment and it seemed to connect with something over which she had puzzled not a little of late.

"When Father and Aunt Alice quarreled, was it because of my mother?"

"Yes, dearie," nodded Grandmother, "it was because of your mother, but that need not trouble you either. Other people's quarrels are hard to understand. You know your mother better than Aunt Alice did, and

you will believe me when I say that you have every reason to be proud of her.”

“Thank you, Grandmother,” said Hale, kissing her fervently. “I am proud of her. I almost worship her, and I don’t care what Aunt Alice thinks, I know she was—a queen.”

CHAPTER X

THE DRAMATIC CLUB

IF Hale had any doubts of the feelings of her class toward her, they were dispelled next morning when she entered the school grounds. Martha Holmes, Clara Grant, Marion Shedd, and several others were waiting for her. Marion was their spokesman.

“Hale, you’re a brick!” she began. “Did you ever see such mean things as we were to laugh like that?”

“That’s all right,” faltered Hale, surprised and pleased. “I don’t mind a bit now, but I was pretty mad at the time.”

“You had a right to be,” declared Marion. “It was partly Miss Marsh and her funny, shocked face that made us laugh.”

“She was rather surprised,” agreed Hale. The girls closed in about her.

“We want you to do something for us,” said Edith Hatch, taking Hale’s hand and

smoothing it coaxingly between her own. "We want you to teach us to read like that, so we can do it and show Miss Marsh we like your way. Will you?"

"Of course not," laughed Hale. "I couldn't teach anybody anything. All you have to do is make believe you're the person talking, and say it the way he'd say it."

The girls looked at her hopelessly.

"You think we can because you can," said Edith. "You don't know how stupid we are."

"You're not stupid," protested Hale, "and if you keep thinking 'Make it real,' you'll soon get it. It's just the same thing as dramatizing the stories."

The girls shook their heads. Dramatize? What was that?

"Make plays out of the stories and act them. It would be fun with such a lot of you. When Miss Dwight and I did it we had to take two or three parts apiece because we were only two; but you could have any number of people and no trouble at all."

"How do we begin?" asked Clara.

“Pick out a story that has lots of talking in it and each girl be somebody in the story. I’ll tell you at recess,” finished Hale abruptly, as the gong began to ring and they all started on the run.

When Hale had a bright idea it always meant the beginning of a train of ideas that developed like microbes into a formidable size within an hour. Thus, while Miss Marsh was droning perfunctorily through the allotted number of Bible verses as an opening exercise, Hale had formed a Dramatic Club and prepared the girls for the production of a play, to be given in costume,—where? This obstacle detained her but an instant, till she thought of a certain little building on the hill back of Grandmother’s house.

The “little house,” as the family called it, was the one in which Grandfather and Grandmother had started housekeeping years ago, while their own house was being built. Hale had investigated it through the windows and found it was a storehouse for old tables and broken-backed chairs. She would ask Grand-

mother if the girls could give their play there.

The play, she decided, should be made out of the "Ivanhoe" selection with more added from the novel itself. By the time lessons were well under way, she had decided upon the characters. Edith Hatch, the fair-haired, should be the Disinherited Knight; Marion Shedd should be Prince John, the usurper; that girl over there, Beatrice something, would do for Hubert the forester, she was so heavy and important; Hale herself would be gay Locksley, nothing less; she couldn't tell who else would be needed till she had looked up the story to find out what parts they would use.

Recess found them with their heads bent in a circle around Hale while she explained the Dramatic Club, already a reality in her mind. A chorus of approval accompanied her explanations.

"That's grand, Hale."

"Won't that be lovely!"

"How do you think of such lovely things to do!"

"We never had anything so exciting before!"

"I'll hunt up the story to-night and decide what we can use and give you all your parts as soon as I can think it out," promised Hale.

There was a general acquiescence to this course of action, which, however, was not quite unanimous. Beatrice Philips said "Indeed" in a sarcastic way that caught Hale's attention.

"Nobody has to belong to the club that doesn't want to," she said, flushing, and misunderstanding the import of the remark.

"Indeed!" repeated Beatrice, with cutting emphasis; "if there is a Dramatic Club, I shall belong, of course; but there isn't any club yet. It has to be formed, I should think. When it is formed, it will have to have officers and it might happen that you won't be the boss."

"Quit, Bee! Don't be hateful," begged Edith.

"I'm not hateful, but she might as well know that she can't run things if she does come from the city."

"I don't want to run things," began Hale, but the gong put an end to explanations and the girls flocked in.

Hale was not very happy over the turn affairs had taken. Aunt Alice's words came back to her, about "setting herself up." Could Beatrice think that about her? Surely, the girls had begged her to teach them or she would never have offered.

Into the clutter of questioning and puzzling which busied her thoughts, Marion Shedd dropped one of her characteristic pictures. It represented a ruffed-up rooster (marked B. P.) stretching out its neck menacingly toward a little robin (marked H. M.). The rooster, according to a bubble proceeding from its mouth, was saying, "Don't you dare to speak around here. I'm the cock of this walk." The robin, also in a bubble, was saying, "Excuse me, sir." Underneath was the pertinent information, "But when it comes to flying, the robin can and the rooster can *not*."

Hale accepted what comfort she could from this bit of picture and awaited further ex-

planations. These came to her at noon when Edith Hatch walked home with her.

"Bee's mother has always tried to run things in this town and Bee is a pocket edition. She thinks she is quite the thing in elocution, speaks pieces with gestures at church suppers, and so on; but she is stiff and stupid at it. All is, we'll have to let her take some part and manage to keep peace somehow. I suppose she was right about forming the club, but we won't let her run it, never fear."

"I suppose there is no reason why she shouldn't run it," said Hale, "I'm sure I don't want to."

"She'd ruin it," declared Edith in alarm. "Nobody can bear her bossy ways and, if we are going to do anything interesting, we'll simply have to keep her where she can't bust the whole thing up."

"All right; you see to it. I'm sure I don't know how. When you live with your own family, the way I always have, you don't know much about quarrels with other girls."

"It's nothing but jealousy," said Edith.

“She’ll behave herself, or we’ll put her out.”

Beatrice, meanwhile, was having a heated argument with Marion Shedd.

“Whatever you do, don’t be mean, Bee! Hale didn’t put herself into this thing. We asked her to do it.”

“She thinks she’s so smart it makes me hot,” snapped Beatrice. “Think of her getting up and reading the way she did yesterday. Just to show off, I say.”

“Stuff, Bee! You know if you could do as well, you would do it every day. I know I would. You might as well own up you’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Then what ails you?”

“You’re not very polite,” parried Beatrice, angrily.

“Well, you weren’t very polite to Hale. If you join the Dramatic Club, you’ve got to be nice to her, or we’ll be ashamed of you.”

“She’s got you wrapped around her little finger, the whole lot of you. Just because she’s new and showy.”

"There, Bee! cool off, or you'll be saying something foolish. Come over to my house after school if you decide you want to join the club. It's not compulsory, remember."

Marion turned in at her gate and left Beatrice to proceed alone. She knew to a certainty that Beatrice would never let a Dramatic Club come into action without her.

This was true. Beatrice returned to the afternoon session in an outwardly gracious mood. Her mother had loaned her a copy of the Woman's Club Constitution and By-Laws. This she showed to Edith Hatch and asked if it wouldn't be a good idea to model their club after it.

"Do you have to have all that highbrow stuff!" asked Edith. "It sounds rather stiff and heavy for youngsters like us."

"It's the only right way to form a club," maintained Beatrice.

"We'll see what the other girls say."

A minute later Marion drew Edith aside and said, "Mother thinks we ought to have an older person in the club, to keep us out of quarrels with Beatrice and her kind. What

do you say if we ask Miss Blair to come this afternoon and start us right?"

The plan met Edith's approval and the two girls rushed in to lay it before their former teacher, who assured them that she was highly flattered to be asked and, if they didn't expect to work her too hard, she would be glad to be an honorary member of the club.

It was well Miss Blair was with them, they decided; for her judgment and tact were needed. When she had steered them safely through the formalities of organizing the club and electing four officers, the question of a constitution arose, and with it Beatrice Philips.

"Madam President," she began with vigor, "I have written out a constitution which I think will be a good one for our club. I will read it."

This she proceeded to do, amid the puzzled looks of the girls, who after a season of polite attention cast down their eyes and gave up the struggle.

Beatrice's elaborate effort ran as follows:

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CONSTITUTION OF THE DRAMATIC
CLUB.

ARTICLE I.

NAME.

This club shall be designated the Girls' Dramatic Club of Hawthorne.

ARTICLE II.

OBJECT.

The object of the Club shall be to inoculate in its members the principles of the histrionic art of acting plays.

ARTICLE III.

MEMBERSHIP.

SEC. 1. The membership shall consist of not more than fifteen girls who have manifest histrionic genius.

SEC. 2. New Members shall be admitted after their names have been proposed by two members in good standing and regularly voted upon in a regular meeting of the club.

SEC. 3. Any member who absents herself from the meetings or proves to be untalented

in powers of dramatic interpretation shall be dropped by vote of those present at any meeting.

SEC. 4. The dues shall be fifty cents annually, payable in advance, to be expended on a party at some convenient day to be set after due discussion in club meeting and made to fit the convenience of the majority of members.

ARTICLE IV.

MEETINGS.

The Club shall meet regularly every Thursday afternoon at the close of school, all school vacations out.

ARTICLE V.

OFFICERS.

SEC. 1. The officers shall be a President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer, their duties being such as are customary for such officers.

SEC. 2. These officers shall be elected by ballot at the annual meeting.

ARTICLE VI.

COMMITTEES.

The committees shall be

1st. Play Committee to select the plays and assign the parts;

2nd. Party Committee to supervise the expenditures of the club dues, as aforementioned.

ARTICLE VII.

ORDER OF BUSINESS.

The order of business at the regular meetings shall be one half hour practicing the play and one half hour devoted to refreshments to be furnished by the girl whose house we meet at.

It was really good of Miss Blair not to laugh at this effort of Bee's. She had many times, in the year Beatrice was her pupil, found more sound than sense in her written work.

"Suppose we take it up article by article and vote upon it," was her suggestion when

President Edith had asked in a helpless way what they should do with it.

When the voting was over and the constitution complete, it read as follows:

ARTICLE I.

NAME.

The Club shall be called the Dramatic Club of Hawthorne.

(“Boys can belong if they want to. We might need them,” Clara Grant had suggested.)

ARTICLE II.

OBJECT.

The object of the Club shall be to have good times acting little plays.

ARTICLE III.

MEMBERSHIP.

Any boy or girl who enjoys acting plays may join by vote of the members. There shall be no dues.

ARTICLE IV.

MEETINGS.

The Club shall meet on Thursdays after school.

ARTICLE V.

OFFICERS.

The officers shall be President, Vice President, and Secretary, besides Custodian for stage properties, elected by ballot at the first meeting in September.

Beatrice thought the new form entirely too brief and simple to be called a constitution, but had to submit to majority rule.

Miss Blair then asked Hale to explain a little of what she had in mind for the "Ivanhoe" dramatization, and when she had done so, Miss Blair suggested that it would be more club-like and more interesting if she asked some of the others to help her work out the scenes.

When the meeting was about to adjourn, Miss Blair offered another suggestion. Truly, the honorary member was a great addition to the club.

“How many of you have been to the house called ‘Fruitlands’ where Louisa May Alcott lived when she was a little girl?” she asked.

Clara Grant had been, but none of the others.

“This Dramatic Club made me think of Miss Alcott, who, you remember, was fond of acting plays with her sisters. I wondered if we wouldn’t all enjoy a trip to ‘Fruitlands’ Saturday afternoon to see the house.”

The girls thought it would be grand.

“Then let’s go,” said Miss Blair. “It will cost us each thirty cents, for carfare and admission, for the house is now a museum.”

After a few minutes spent in making arrangements, the President of the new Dramatic Club declared the meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER XI

FRUITLANDS

HALE looked forward with pleasure to the "Fruitlands" trip because she knew and loved Miss Alcott's books, and aspired to follow in her footsteps some day.

No one had prepared her for the location of the farmhouse; in fact, no one had told her that it was a farmhouse. She had given that detail very little thought, but vaguely supposed it to be a village house in a village street.

"Look, Hale," cried Marion, pointing off to the left.

They had climbed a long hill from the depot, turning to the left and following the main street of the quiet little village till it led up a steep rise and wound along the side of another hill.

Hale looked and gasped.

Immediately before them was a beautiful white house built in Italian villa style and perched on the side of the hill, below the road, so that they looked down upon its red roof, its pillared verandas, and its formal Italian garden.

Beyond the house, the hill swept down across velvety green pastures to the railroad, and beyond that to meadows and a silvery thread of river. Mounting on the other side through fields and woods, the country rose into hill after hill, a wall of green, dotted with occasional farmhouses.

Never had Hale gazed upon such a prospect. The view from her bedroom window which made her feel lonesome and empty was a mere handful to this. She looked and looked. It almost seemed that the great wide valley must be all the kingdoms of the world and that she and this little group were all the people in them. She felt a compelling desire to sink right down where she stood and hold on to something stable to keep from getting lost in that far-flung valley.

The others had seen the view before, but

they were all silently absorbed in it for many minutes. Presently Marion roused her friend with a gentle protest.

“Would you just as soon not grab quite so hard, Hale? It begins to hurt a little.”

Hale recovered her presence of mind and found she had been holding Marion by the arm with a grip that made her own fingers ache.

“How dreadful!” she said. “Do please forgive me, Marion.”

“This outlook sort of scared you,” suggested Marion.

“It is so big it makes me feel all hollow and—holy.”

“I know,” agreed Marion, with a sympathetic pressure of her hand. “I feel that way, too. This is the real world, all big and beautiful and broad. It always makes me feel that I’d be ashamed to do anything petty or ugly or mean as long as I live. It is better than a sermon.”

Hale thought it was. They lingered and looked and talked of the points of interest. Miss Blair could name all the high peaks and

could tell the names of the people who lived in the houses far and near. Hale, listening to her stories of this and that family and their traditions, wondered how people in the country ever came to know about one another, living so far apart.

It made her feel homesick and strange and helpless; and she was glad when Edith reminded them of the object of their trip.

“There is where we are going” she said, pointing to a little red house on the slope below the villa, not quite down to the railroad.

Fruitlands was a typical farmhouse of the eighteenth century, with a big kitchen which occupied the entire length of the house across the back. Into this the young people entered by a side door. The front of the house was divided into two rooms and a tiny front entry, and it was to these that the guide directed them and began her story of the Fruitlands experiment.

The first room was a dining-room, not used much in the days when Miss Alcott had lived there as a child, because the family ate gen-

erally at a long table in the far end of the kitchen. The dining-room was used for special guests, however, when Emerson and other friends came to visit the Con-Sociate Family.

Hale was not very well acquainted with the Fruitlands history, though Miss Blair had tried to tell them a little about the hope Bronson Alcott had entertained that he could establish a colony in which "plain living and high thinking" should be the rule.

She now learned from the guide that he had gathered a small group of sympathetic friends and established what he called the Con-Sociate Family at this little farmhouse. Here they had attempted to live from a common fund, without help of animals either as food or as beasts of burden. The farm work was to be done entirely by hand, and the vegetable products of the soil were to constitute their "pure sustenance."

Mrs. Alcott, with her four little girls to clothe and care for, was expected to transform the raw materials from their native state into such dishes as would appeal to the

appetites of the men of the group, made sharp by outdoor labor.

The young people found it a pathetic tale. How could men of such soft hands and quiet habits expect to wring a living from the soil without animals to work for them and without any former training in agriculture! Was it any wonder that the first snows of winter found the colony reduced to Mr. and Mrs. Alcott and the little girls? Those who were merely followers of the great idea had slipped away to livings more secure and comfortable, leaving Mr. Alcott a sad and disappointed leader without a following.

The young people passed from room to room as the story progressed. In the little entry they saw the built-in bookcases containing the small library, mostly books on philosophy, on which the dreamers browsed. In the bedroom beyond was the family Bible, the bust of Socrates, and the bed on which the broken-hearted Alcott attempted to die of grief when he realized that his great plan was not practical.

The kitchen was an interesting room, with

a long table flanked by benches where the meals were served after they had been cooked at the wide fireplace.

"No butter for their bread!" exclaimed Clara Grant, echoing the words of the guide, "and no milk to crumble it into! Girls! did you ever hear the like of that!"

"Those are animal foods," the guide reminded them. "Eggs were also prohibited, and fats of all kinds except olive or other vegetable oils."

"Think of it!" reiterated Clara. "I don't see how poor Mrs. Alcott cooked without those things."

The guide went on to explain that Mrs. Alcott was not in sympathy with the experiment, but had such love and respect for her husband that she was willing to work at great disadvantage that he might test his theories.

The thought was constantly in Hale's mind that Mrs. Alcott must have been at a loss to find the honey in her lot.

The up-stairs rooms were quaint and interesting, the garret most of all. Here the girls could stand erect only in the very center

under the ridgepole, but the guide assured them that the little Alcott girls had slept there and enjoyed it, too, especially on rainy nights when the music on the roof lulled them to sleep.

It looked dreary enough now. Hale knew she would die of the blues to have to sleep in such a cavern. Yet she found a lesson in the little house, as did each of the others.

“If Louisa May Alcott could grow up to be such a wonderful writer with nothing better than this to start on, I’d be ashamed to give up till I’d tried with all my might,” she thought.

“Mrs. Alcott must have been an angel incarnate, to be patient with her husband’s queer ideas,” said Clara.

“With all this outdoors to look at, I don’t wonder Mr. Alcott expected his food to rain down from heaven,” breathed Edith, looking out the tiny window-panes across to the hills.

“What puzzles me is the eats!” said Marion, shaking her head in despair. “Corn-meal mush with molasses wouldn’t suit me as a steady diet; but I suppose it might be more

sensible than macaroons and ice-cream. It makes me feel terribly extravagant."

Hale was silent. She could not speak of the honey and the bee, for the girls would not understand; but she told Grandmother all about it by the fire that night and was strengthened in her resolution to find all the honey she could in her more comfortable lot.

Miss Blair had brought with her a copy of Miss Alcott's "Transcendental Wild Oats," for she well knew that the girls would enjoy the whimsical interpretation of the experiment, and felt that this would be the best time to acquaint them with it, while the story and its impressions were fresh in their minds.

As soon as they had seen all there was to see in the house, they sat down under the big mulberry-trees by the front door to hear the tale and laugh over the nonsensical twist the writer gave to ideas which the originators had taken so seriously.

When it was time to close the book and go back to the depot to meet the train for Hawthorne, they left the little house reluctantly.

CHAPTER XII

A BUSINESS TRANSACTION

HALE was practicing one warm Saturday morning when the doorbell rang. She knew that Grandmother and Aunt Alice were motoring with Mrs. Porter, but supposed that Delia was at hand to answer the bell. When, however, she did not respond to the second peal, Hale went herself to answer it.

“Good morning, my dear,” began the lady on the porch. “Is Miss Merrill at home?”

“Not just now; she is out motoring with Mrs. Porter.”

The strange lady smiled very sweetly and opened the screen-door, which Hale had unlocked.

“Indeed, dearie! But, of course, you’ll do just as well.”

She was in the hall now, looking about with great interest.

"Where can we sit down to talk? Oh, yes, the sitting-room, of course"; and she followed Hale's fluttering little gesture toward that cool, darkened room. Hale followed the lady, trying to recall her name.

"We shall need a little more light here. There, one blind will do. Now, that's better. Isn't it warm! You'll excuse me if I lay off my hat and gloves. It will rest me so."

"Oh, yes," murmured Hale, trying not to stare too hard at the many rings that came to light when the gloves were removed.

"I will not ask her who she is," she was saying to herself, "for if I wait she will probably tell me."

Meantime, the lady had settled herself comfortably in the wicker rocker and, leaning her head back wearily, had closed her eyes. In her lap Hale now saw a small black flannel bag.

Presently the tired lady opened her eyes and sat up with a jerk.

"Why, bless me! I nearly fell asleep. It is so cool and restful here after the glare outside."

Hale, still unable to think of any remark, nodded acquiescence. The lady spoke on.

“Let me see,” she said, as if trying to recollect a fact she had forgotten, “where are you in school now?”

“In the ninth grade.”

“Oh, sure enough! And do you study history?”

“Yes, United States history.”

“Capital! Now I have here exactly what you need.”

Out of the black bag the lady whipped a thin leather-covered book, and, slipping her chair quite close to Hale's, she opened at the preface and began to read very fast a certain underlined passage which Hale did not wholly succeed in understanding.

“‘No home should be without its history library. Daily, almost hourly, some member of the family will wish to verify a half-remembered bit, it may be of Greek, of Roman, of English, of Russian, of Spanish, or of American history. To own separate histories of all these nations would require more money to purchase and more room to

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store the books than the average family can spare. It has been the purpose of the editor of these volumes to present in compact form, yet in a vivid manner, the salient facts from the history of all nations; that the youth may take pleasure in the culture history can give him, that the mature man may frequently remind himself of the facts he learned in youth, and that both shall do so with the least possible loss of time and effort.' ”

The underlining ceased, and Hale breathed a sigh of relief. It was clear now that this was a book agent, and not a friend of her aunt's. She must be listened to politely and dismissed firmly. Hale knew that her mother had never bought books in this way.

Turning a few pages, the agent continued.

“This is the first volume, the history of the Hebrew people from the beginning of the world to the capture of Jerusalem by the Turks. Beautifully illustrated and absolutely authentic. Rabbi Bornstein told me the other day that he simply must have the set just for that volume, the illustrations were so good and the story itself so cap-

tivating. Picture of the Children of Israel crossing the Dead Sea. Oh, yes, Red Sea; excuse me! Solomon building the temple—perfectly wonderful building.”

The pictures *were* interesting. Hale wished she might be permitted to turn the pages herself, for the agent was skipping some.

“This volume begins with the Greek legends and myths; you must have read some of them. Lovely picture of Pandora; beautiful story, isn’t it, of Hope staying in the box; picture of Pallas Athene, the Goddess of the Chase.”

“Oh, no! she was the Goddess of Wisdom.”

“So she was! Well, I get things mixed sometimes. Now here is a volume on Roman history; all the Roman myths and recorded history; the wonderful conquests of the Cæsars; the art treasures of Rome.”

A persistent, penetrating odor had been drifting in at the window in whiffs and now it came more forcefully and fairly smote upon them. Hale sniffed vigorously once or twice;

then with a breathless, "My goodness me!" she fled to the kitchen.

When she returned after a few minutes she found the book agent comfortably asleep in the rocker. She stood a moment irresolute in the doorway, wishing she knew how to dismiss her unwelcome guest. Undoubtedly she could do this better if the lady were awake. So Hale came within reach of the chair and gave it a sudden shake.

"Oh, yes," continued the agent, as if there had been no interruption, "all the art treasures of Rome. Picture of the Vatican. What was it that burned?"

"Something that Delia left on the stove. I can't think where she has gone," puzzled Hale.

"Too bad," consoled the agent, indifferently. "Now to resume, here is Germany, France, England,—what?" for Hale had made a swift gesture which the agent translated to mean interest.

"Is there anything about Joan of Arc?"

"Indeed yes! pages and pages. Here's a picture of her."

A quick turn of the well-known leaves of the prospectus showed Hale the picture, and she suddenly found her tongue.

“That’s beautiful,” she said. “I think Joan of Arc was so splendid. What a lovely picture!”

“Wouldn’t you like to have that picture where you can look at it whenever you wish?”

“Yes,” admitted Hale.

“Then why not have the set, complete in sixteen volumes, in cloth, half-morocco, or full-leather bind; payments in any way you like, full settlement at once or in easy installments.”

Hale found it very hard to understand the agent when she struck into her stock phrases.

“Did you say how much they cost?” she ventured.

“That depends on the bind, dear. Which bind do you like best?” She displayed them all on a folder.

“This is the prettiest, I think.”

“The full leather. Yes, my dear, I see you have the infallible taste of a lady. Now, that would be thirty-eight dollars; not much, you

see. You can pay by installment, if you like."

"Father will pay for them," Hale assured her.

"To be sure. Won't he be delighted to, when he knows you are so much interested in your books. I have never seen a more intelligent little girl. Yes, that's a lovely picture of Joan of Arc, just grand."

While she talked, the agent was hunting through the black flannel bag for a contract-blank, which she now laid on the table where pen and ink were ready.

"You sign here," indicated the agent, and Hale wrote with great care her round-hand signature.

"The books will be sent at once and you will receive from the company each month a bill for three dollars which is the usual way of paying; but if your father wants to pay all at once you have only to let them know it by remitting the whole amount and the transaction will be complete."

The phrases were getting stereotyped again, and Hale found it difficult to follow,

especially as she was busy catching a last glimpse of the rings as they disappeared into the gloves. With wonderful speed for so weary a lady, the agent made her exit. Hale stood at the door and watched her down the drive.

She had a strong desire to run after her and take it all back. It was borne in very strongly to her that some one should have been consulted before she promised to take the books. All that held her back was the signing of her name to that paper. She didn't know what she had signed, for she had not read a word of it, but she was afraid to protest now, it might be illegal, it would surely be embarrassing. At any rate, the agent was gone, so she couldn't now if she wanted to.

Hale returned to her practising, through every note of which ran the fruitless wish that she had not signed for the books. Only too well she recalled that her father had often expressed his disapproval of book-agent methods. He might object to sending her thirty-eight dollars to pay for a set of books,

especially as their library at home was well stocked. O dear! why had she been trapped!

She remembered it was due to the picture of Joan of Arc. Her face relaxed its pucker as she wished that she might see again that picture of Joan of Arc. She loved the story of that inspired peasant maid. Even as she thought of her, she found herself sitting straighter at the piano and practising more vigorously. Yet she sagged whenever she remembered the thirty-eight dollars. She wondered if that would seem a lot of money to her father.

Of Delia and the burned apple-sauce she did not think again till the motor-car came back to the door and Grandmother and Aunt Alice rang to be admitted.

“Here’s the meat for dinner, Hale. Tell Delia to be sure to broil it through; it is thicker than usual.”

Arrived at the kitchen and finding the apple-sauce standing in the sink where she had put it, and no Delia in sight, Hale was not long in spreading the news of her absence.

They hunted her in vain, up-stairs, down cellar, in the garden. No Delia was to be found.

“It’s getting so late I’ll have to get dinner myself,” said Aunt Alice, donning a big apron and looking critically at the small spark of fire that was left. “I never knew Delia to fail us before.”

The preparations had not advanced very far when the truant returned. Very rosy and out of breath, she came panting in and took the paring-knife out of Hale’s hand.

“I’ll finish these,” she gasped, trying not to show how excited she was.

Miss Merrill eyed her curiously, but said nothing as she removed the big apron and started to leave the room.

“I went to see a sick friend, Miss Merrill,” Delia halted her to explain. “I’m sorry I was late about dinner.”

“Be as prompt as you can. You must have gone unexpectedly,” remarked Miss Merrill, pointing at the apple-sauce.

“I did. I was sent for in a hurry and

couldn't wait. I was that stirred about, I forgot everything."

Miss Merrill murmured something about it being an unusual state of affairs and motioned Hale to precede her. They left the kitchen and the belated dinner to a strangely flustered Delia.

There was destined to be another fluttering heart under that roof before many minutes, for no sooner had they reached the sitting-room than Aunt Alice noticed that the cover was off the ink-stand.

"What have you been doing with the ink, Hale?"

"Oh, did I forget to cover it?" asked Hale, very red and uncomfortable.

"What were you doing with it?" persisted Aunt Alice.

"Just signing my name," faltered Hale.

"To what?"

"To a—I don't know what."

"Don't know! What do you mean?"

"It was a paper. A book agent came to see you," finished Hale, miserably.

"Then you signed for a book!"

“A set of history books. I’m sure Father will be willing I should have them. He will send me the money,” Hale spoke with some spirit now. She had intended to say nothing to Aunt Alice about the books, but quietly write to her father and ask for the money. Forced to tell her folly in this humiliating way, she could not do otherwise than defend herself and her act, however much she might in private doubt the wisdom of what she had done.

“He will not be very likely to send you the money,” said Aunt Alice, coldly. “He has money troubles enough to think of, in all conscience, without that. I forbid you to write to your father of this matter, Hale. Do you understand? You must pay for the books yourself.”

Hale’s lips parted in protest, but Aunt Alice raised a detaining hand and continued:

“I will advance the sum to you, and you can have plenty of time to repay it; but you must pay it, every cent. It will teach you the value of money. How much will it be?”

“Thirty-eight dollars,” said Hale, a bright

red spot glowing on each cheek and her eyes burning darkly.

“That is a great piece of folly, Hale. How could you spend so much money without asking some one’s advice?”

“I don’t know,” said Hale, solemnly. “I think the woman hypnotized me.”

“That’s no excuse. I should hope a niece of mine would be proof against any such measures. Remember now; not a word to your father.”

Hale promised and fled. It is one thing to know you have been foolish, but quite another to be told so by a self-righteous aunt. The first makes you sad, the second makes you mad. Why could she not ask her father for the money! He would have mercy on her feelings; and while he would think it was a piece of folly, he would go to great pains to make her think it wasn’t such a bad mistake for an inexperienced little girl to make. What did Aunt Alice mean by money troubles! At least she would write Father about that, without mentioning the books.

The correspondence between Hale and her

father had been of a strictly personal nature. He had said that he was well and thinking often of her; he had entered sympathetically into her new experiences and told her how some of them were similar to his own boyhood activities; but of the object for which he had left her to the tender mercies of Aunt Alice and departed for such remote regions he had said nothing at all. The fact that it was business had satisfied her; but if it was money troubles she ought to know about it. She would ask him next time she wrote.

CHAPTER XIII

A KITCHEN ROMANCE

“DEAR FATHER:

“I have a very remarkable thing to tell you this time because we have had a romance in the kitchen. Listen and see if this wouldn't make a good story plot.

“Delia is the girl that works for Aunt Alice. She has worked here five years. Yesterday morning Delia left the kitchen, apple-sauce on the stove and all, and went away suddenly. The apple-sauce burned and I smelled it while the book agent was here. Afterward I forgot about it till Grandmother and Aunt Alice came home. Then we couldn't find Delia anywhere. Aunt Alice and I started getting dinner. Soon Delia appeared very breathless and said she had been to see a sick friend.

“It looked very strange at the time, but Aunt Alice didn't question her. She thinks it is beneath the dignity of a lady to question the help, and all things come out sooner or later, anyway.

“This came out very soon; for just before supper-time a man came into the yard and went to the back door. I was in the kitchen making some paste for a costume for Locks-

ley the Outlaw in a play we have made out of 'Ivanhoe' for the Dramatic Club. I heard Delia tell the man to go away. She seemed very cross at him and he wouldn't go away.

"By-and-by I heard him say, 'Does Miss Merrill know you are married?' Of course, I wasn't trying to hear, but the paste was lumpy and I couldn't take it into the sitting-room till I was through stirring it. When he said that, she said, 'Sh!' and went outside with him into the yard. They talked a few minutes more and he went away.

"I didn't know whether it would be honorable to tell Aunt Alice what I had heard, but I decided to wait and see if Delia's conscience would permit her to keep the awful secret, especially as she must have known that I heard the man's question. Of course, I was wondering very much who her husband was and where he could be all this time.

"We were destined soon to find out. Soon after we were settled in the sitting-room for the evening, I heard a rap at the front door and Aunt Alice told me to open it because it was probably Forest.

"When I opened the door there was the same man who had talked with Delia and asked her that accusing question. He asked to see Miss Merrill, so I opened the door for him to enter. Aunt Alice was not very glad to see him for he was not gentlemanly looking, but thin and untidy, and smelled of tobacco.

"She didn't offer him a chair, so he leaned

against the door-frame and crumpled his cap while he talked. The first thing he said was very dramatic. If I write this in a play, as I expect to some day, I shall use these very words: 'My wife won't take care of me.'

"Aunt Alice was dramatic, too. She straightened up where she was standing, not very near him because of the strong tobacco, and she said, 'What is that to me?' She was very angry I could see. Grandmother and I wondered what he could mean, also; though I had a faint suspicion now. The light was beginning to dawn.

"The man almost cried; he whined and put his head back against the door as he said, 'You could say she must, ma'am.'

"Then Aunt Alice asked, 'Who is your wife?'

"Of course, I was partly prepared for the answer, but the others were dumfounded to hear him say, 'Delia is my wife.'

"With that he laid his head back against the door frame once more and gave a sort of big deep sigh, and slipped right down, down to the floor.

"Aunt Alice never moved from where she stood. Grandmother started out of her chair to reach him, but Aunt Alice stopped her. She kept her eyes on the man and said, 'Hale, call Delia.'

"I flew to the kitchen thinking how dramatic it would be if I should swing open the door and say, 'Delia, your husband lies dead in the sitting-room!' When I got there I

was trembling so I could not carry out the part. I simply said, 'Delia, Aunt Alice wants you.'

"So in came Delia all unsuspecting and at first she didn't see him, for he was lying just where the sofa and the table hid him from her. Aunt Alice looked tragic and Delia was trembling under the expectation of a scolding.

"Aunt Alice said, 'Delia, do you know this man?'

"When Delia looked and saw him, she went right down on the floor beside him and kissed him and cried over him and rubbed his hair. Then she sat on the floor and took his head in her lap and began to order Aunt Alice around, to get water and smelling-salts and a fan, while she took off his dirty collar and patted him and cried over him and laughed over him, all excited.

"There wasn't any doubt he was her husband; he wasn't the kind of a man you'd kiss if he wasn't your husband; so we all began to hope he wasn't dead. He wasn't. By-and-by he opened his eyes and looked at us, and when he saw Delia had his head in her lap he smiled and shut his eyes again and reached for her hand and held it hard.

"Delia was terribly embarrassed. She didn't offer to move; she hardly looked up. Shame seemed to claim her for its own. She waited for Aunt Alice to speak. Aunt Alice waited, too, thinking hard. Grandmother and I didn't say anything. We never do

when Aunt Alice is thinking out a problem. The silence was strong and kind of funny.

"By-and-by Aunt Alice spoke. 'Delia, I will telephone for a doctor and while we are waiting for him to come you may put your husband's head on a pillow and leave him resting here while we fix up a bed for him.'

"I was surprised and so was Delia. She fixed the pillow and followed Aunt Alice out of the room. I didn't know where they went at the time, but I found out afterward they fixed a bed out in the little cabin behind the house. I suppose you remember the little house where Grandmother lived long ago while this house was being built.

"Grandmother and I stayed in the sitting-room and hardly knew whether to talk or be silent, while the man (his name is Michael O'Shea, so I might as well call him that, though we didn't know it at the time) lay on the floor. When he roused a little and tried to get up Grandmother told him to lie still and Delia would soon come back.

"The doctor got here just as Forest came in for his regular Saturday-evening call, which was lucky because Michael was too sick to walk. They made a chair with their arms and took him out to the little house.

"To-day Delia has been telling Aunt Alice about him.

"She and Michael have been married since ever they landed in this country five years ago. Think of it! They had no money and

decided to work separately till they could save up a lot to keep house with. Delia got work with Aunt Alice, as you know, and Michael found a place in the city as a coachman. He had to take care of the lady's flower-beds, too. He got sick this fall and she had to get another man. As soon as Michael was a little better she turned him away and kept the other man.

"Poor Michael! He came to Hawthorne to see Delia, but he wasn't strong enough to travel and had to send a boy with a note to tell Delia he was waiting to see her at the depot and would she please come. I told you how she went and left the apple-sauce to burn. Delia was afraid to let him come here; she thought Aunt Alice might be strict about it; so she told him to go find a room somewhere and rest till he was able to work and she would come and see him sometimes.

"He could hardly walk to find a place to live and all the people he asked to take him wouldn't do it because he looked so sick they didn't want him on their hands. So he came back here and Delia was still too scared to take him in. When she sent him away he only went as far as the road and sat down by the gateway to rest. Then he mustered the courage to come and make an appeal to Aunt Alice.

"Now, isn't that a romantic thing to happen right here in this everyday house!

"Delia is so pleased to get him, even sick, that she can't think of anything else. This

morning she filled the salt-shakers with sugar and spoiled Aunt Alice's boiled eggs. She giggles and blushes all the time and runs out to the cabin to see if he is all right.

"Aunt Alice says they may live in the cabin and perhaps when Michael is stronger he can chop wood and work about the place instead of her hiring a man from the village. It will be very nice for them, but I am sorry about the cabin, because I was planning to have it for a play-house, I mean theater plays. Our lovely dramatization of 'Ivanhoe' will have to be staged somewhere else.

"Loads of love,

"HALE.

"P. S. I didn't answer your question about the reading-lessons. It is all right, I guess. Miss Marsh lets me read as I like, though she never praises me for it. Three of my friends read the same way now, and they all listen politely since that first day.

"HALE.

"P. S. again. Are we very poor?"

The advent of Michael O'Shea caused an unwonted stir in Miss Merrill's well-ordered household. Delia the steady was so "stirred about" that she was hardly accountable for her acts.

Sugar in the salt-shakers was only one of her numerous lapses from the accustomed ways of life. Miss Alice was annoyed to find

a succession of mistakes following in the wake of her once accurate Delia. She found the broom resting upon its business end instead of reversed, as she had always required, to save its shape; the curtains were raised one morning three inches above the middle sash, instead of on a line with it; the rolls were allowed to rise too much; the batter cakes were served lukewarm; and the eggs were allowed to cook too long.

The climax was reached when the poor be-flustered Delia, intent upon filling the tea-kettle, lifted the stove cover and poured a dipperful of water into the firepot.

Miss Merrill opened the kitchen door in time to see this unfortunate mistake. She seized the girl by the shoulders and shook her till her head wobbled in all directions.

“There, Delia,” she said, panting for breath, “that is enough of such mooning! If Michael affects you in this way, we’ll have to send him away and you with him. I can’t have such unaccountable actions.”

When she found that the steam had burned Delia’s arm and hand, she took the trouble

to bandage it herself and was more gentle than Delia could have expected.

“I’m that light-headed, Miss Merrill,” she deplored, “I can’t keep me mind from me man lyin’ out there in the little house. I’ve been that lonesome without him these five years it’s kept me steady and quiet like. Now he’s here I’m like a crazy-headed girl again, that merry and flighty. I was a giddy girl in me day, Miss Merrill, and Michael is the b’y that stole me away from the wake at Tim O’Haran’s and clapped me onto the boat to get me away from two other b’ys making eyes at me. He put me in care of the stewardess to keep for him till we reached America and then we were married all right and proper. Shure, any woman ’d be proud of such a bold, brave man as Michael was,—and will be again when he’s well, poor bairn.”

So by fragments and between laughing and crying, the story came to Miss Merrill, and though she could not imagine looking with favor upon a man who would steal her away from a funeral to ship her overseas, she admitted that she and Delia were different in

temperament, and if the girl was satisfied, she ought to be.

As for Michael, the love and care Delia lavished upon him soon transformed him into a clean, jolly Irishman who could turn his hand to almost any little job about the place. Indeed, Michael became quite an important member of the community, for in Hawthorne there was many a manless household where he was continually needed to put up storm-windows, empty ash-barrels, and attend to the numerous little jobs that require a man's muscle.

CHAPTER XIV

HALE TO THE RESCUE

AS the autumn reddened and died upon the woods and hills, Hale grew more and more to love her new surroundings.

It was part of her nature, till now undeveloped, to love the majestic march of the seasons, especially in their appeal to her eye. The riot of yellow and green and purple that had been the stage setting for September days in Hawthorne was an experience unknown to her city life and never to be forgotten, should she live to be a hundred.

Grandmother's garden was buried in golden-glow and nasturtiums, purple asters and purple pansies; the roadsides were masses of goldenrod and wild asters, and over it all hung a veil of golden sunshine.

“Summer’s best of weather
And Autumn’s best of cheer”

were words that for the first time in her life held a real meaning.

Gradually the changes came. Frosts blotted out the nasturtiums, the asters went to seed, and the pansies alone were left to weather the cold and wait for the snow. Along the roadsides the grasses dried, the goldenrod browned and ripened, while overhead the maples and oaks grew brilliant in red and gold. A new color harmony—red, brown, and orange—was draping the stage for October.

No companion in all the world, Hale decided, could have better introduced her to the secrets of field and woods than Roy, on those autumn days. Roy knew where there were wintergreen berries, and took her to find them. She mailed her father a box of them, because Grandmother said they would please him.

Roy knew where there were shagbark trees, and she followed him there as well, tramping the sun-flecked woods, over and through the

leaf carpets, with Ted at their heels. Down on their knees burrowing for nuts among the leaves, they shouted and laughed and grew warm and rosy while they gathered their hoard.

They made the acquaintance of bright-eyed squirrels through competition in the harvest.

“Poor little beasts!” laughed Hale, in sympathy; “we are taking their winter food, Roy. Aren’t we the mean things! See that little fellow looking at us. Let’s sit as still as mice and see if he’ll dare to come and get this nut.”

She laid a nut conspicuously at a little distance, and retired to a convenient post to watch and wait. Roy whittled a stick as he sat beside her. Ted had left them to follow a scent across which his busy nose had passed.

“See, he’s coming down,” whispered Hale. “He never takes his eyes off us. Look, Roy, how he flits his tail so nervously.”

Slowly the little creature came nearer, stepping daintily over the leaves, stopping to listen, his tail sweeping in nervous quivers

behind him. A sudden motion of Roy's busy knife, and he turned tail to flee, but thought better of it when all was quiet again. Step by step, alert, suspicious, he came nearer and nearer to the nut, till suddenly, a pounce. He had it and was speeding to safety, closely pursued by a shaggy brown dog.

"No, no, Ted! come back."

Oh, well! Mr. Squirrel was safe, of course, scrambling up the tree and turning to peer over a limb at his pursuer. Ted barked in disgust that while he was searching far afield for game which he could not find, here was a grand chance to have caught one of those saucy fellows he had so long had his eye on. Too bad.

His only consolation was to nose affectionately at Roy and Hale and be lovingly scolded for chasing a poor little squirrel.

Sometimes the river called them, its waters stained with dyes from factories miles up the stream, its bosom dotted with floating leaves bound they knew not whither.

The safe but clumsy rowboat knew many hours of their companionship. Hale was

"flabby," as Roy said. She knew in theory how to row the boat, after a few lessons, and practised at it as they floated down the stream, but could not budge an inch of progress against the current.

"You'll get there some day, Hale," Roy comforted her, "you have never had the practice. Just feel that!"

"I know it," admitted Hale, feeling his muscle again, indulgently. "I haven't had a chance."

The apple crop drew its share of their attention. The orchard was a busy place in those days. Two men worked all day for many days picking and sorting and packing the fruit. Hale and Roy made themselves familiar by "inside information" with every variety that grew there, and wished for double capacity, at that. Every luscious specimen seemed a challenge to their teeth.

"Gee! but I'm plumb full," groaned Roy, regarding the half-eaten apple in his hand with rueful regret. "Seems a pity to discard such a juicy morsel; but, honest to goodness, I can't swallow another bite. Want it?"

Hale groaned in sympathetic fullness. She, too, had a half-eaten beauty in her hands which she scraped from time to time with her teeth. She held it up for answer, and Roy shied his remnant at a neighboring tree and shattered it to fragments.

"Let's go over to Pine Hollow grove this afternoon and get some more nuts," suggested Hale.

"Can't," said Roy briefly.

"Why not?"

"Got a date with some of the fellows."

"Who are they?"

"Race Wade and Bob Evarts."

Hale looked up quickly from where she sat on the grass with Ted's head pillowed on her knee.

"Not Frank Parsons, I hope," she asked, suspiciously.

Roy stooped to pick a burr out of Ted's shaggy coat and the task kept him occupied for several minutes.

"He might be there, I don't know for sure. Race is the one I'm going with."

"Where are you going?"

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Roy flashed her a look and again busied himself with the burr.

“Seems to me you’re getting inquisitive,” he said; “we are going on a hike, if you must know.”

“Oh, no; I don’t have to know, if you don’t want me to. I didn’t suppose it was a secret,” said Hale, lightly. “Get up, Ted, I have to go in and practise an hour before dinner.”

She brushed off the straws and dog-hairs from her dress with careful exactness, all the time wondering if she could say to Roy what she thought she ought to say. Forest had mentioned Frank Parsons as one of the bad influences over the younger boys of the town, and she knew that Race Wade and Bob Evarts were two of the boys he was anxious about. Perhaps Roy didn’t know about that.

“I hope Frank Parsons isn’t going to be with them this afternoon,” she ventured, timidly. “Forest thinks he is a mean sort of boy.”

“You don’t need to worry about me,” was the confident answer. “I know Frank Par-

sons better than you do, or Forest either, and I don't like him any better than you do. He won't do me any harm, I can promise you; I'm not likely to bow down to his say-so."

Thus comforted, Hale raced with Ted and Roy up through the orchard and the garden, and went in to her practising. Late that afternoon she had cause to think again of Roy's remark and Forest's fears.

Since Roy was not at liberty to go with her to Pine Hollow grove, she decided to go alone to a nearer one, a grove close to the river at the bend. It was rather unusual, going without his companionship, but the call of the October afternoon was irresistible and her mood not averse to solitude.

The season was getting late, but there were still a few field and roadside beauties to gladden her eyes. The persistence of plant life even after a series of blighting frosts was a source of wonder to Hale. The fresh upshooting of clover leaves and the late lingering of gay nodding arnica-blossoms showed her the vitality of apparently frail things.

The river grove was a cathedral-like ar-

rangement of tall hickory-trees, through which the sun slanted in mellow rays, casting long parallel shadows out across the river.

A listless, half-hearted search revealed the fact that the nuts she could find would be few indeed. She didn't much care. It was as much to her taste to sit comfortably at the root of a tree and lean her head back against the trunk, and dream and think. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness. The river made no noise as it slipped gently by; no wind was stirring. All the earth seemed settling down to sleep.

Hale closed her eyes. Her thoughts traveled back and forth over the past weeks with all their new experiences. She had to admit that her father was right in telling her that the new surroundings would not be as hard for her as she had supposed.

Grandmother was all that he had said. Hale was glad for Grandmother! If it were only Aunt Alice, for instance! Grandmother would say that there was honey even in Aunt Alice, but Hale still had to use her powers of imagination to find it.

Then there were Roy, and Ted, and her free and happy romps with them. Why! the very fact that she was not afraid to come to this grove and sit alone was because of her rambles with them. What would Miss Dwight think to hear of her strolling into the woods alone! It would be nice to have Miss Dwight here. Still, she certainly was not afraid.

Suddenly a sound out on the river brought her out of her day dreams, a soft plop, plop, like the dip of oars. Hale opened her eyes and cocked her head to make sure that she had heard aright.

If the occupant of the boat intended to land at the broken platform on the edge of the grove, as she knew the up-river people sometimes did, he would pass her on his way to the road. Far from being courageous now, the thought of having her solitude invaded filled her with alarm. She would hide.

She ran lightly to a thicket of alders that edged the bank a few rods from where the boat would land. Creeping into the midst of this shelter, she crouched and waited.

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She could now hear voices as the boat approached and her fear increased, for she realized that more than one person might land in the grove. After a minute she thought she recognized the voices. Yes, that was certainly Roy's giggle.

The boat drew in toward the landing and beached with a thud. From her retreat Hale could see the boys leap out, four of them, and fasten the rope about a young sapling.

As they went deeper into the grove, she could see that Frank Parsons had his arm familiarly across Roy's shoulder, while the other two slouched along behind in a silly sort of way that looked suspicious.

Hale was burning with mortification. She knew she was only scantily veiled from their sight, if they happened to glance in her direction. Remembering what Roy had told her once about wood creatures that "freeze" to escape observation, she determined to do just that till they were out of the grove. The slightest crackle would arrest their attention and reveal her to them.

To her further distress she soon realized

that they did not intend to leave the grove.

Frank threw himself down in careless ease at the foot of the hickory-tree, exactly where Hale had been sitting. The others seated themselves also, and for the moment all was safe for Hale. Two of the boys were out of her sight behind the tree, the other two were back to her.

Frank, whom she could see, took a cigarette from a box in his pocket, lighted it like an old hand and began to smoke leisurely. Race watched him, with admiration and a trace of doubt.

It was not unknown to any of them that Frank Parsons was a boy disapproved by their elders, careless in speech and actions, untidy in dress and appearance, and likely to sink rather than to rise in the scale of human desirability. None of them liked him very much, yet it was thought to be an honor to receive his attentions and to be bid to his parties, such as they were. This gathering in the woods was one of them, and the host now lolling at ease making smoke from a roll of stuffed paper was arrogantly sure of

his following so long as he kept a few paces ahead of them in daring and in pocket-money.

"Have a smoke?" he asked Race, at the same time lighting a fresh cigarette from the glowing butt of his old one.

Horace Wade lifted his shoulders and laughed foolishly.

"This one won't make you sick, even if the others did; you are more used to it now," Frank told him, between puffs.

Horace protested.

"The others didn't make me sick."

"Oh, didn't they?" laughed Frank. "I thought I heard something about your being slightly indisposed, headache or some such. Don't get on your ear about it. I didn't mean no harm."

Race knew he was being bullied, but he considered it desirable to stand well in Frank's opinion at all costs, so he took the attitude of a cockerel who has had his supremacy challenged.

"Give me one; I'll show you I can smoke as well as you. There's nothing so smart

about smoking," he sneered, his chin lifted in contempt.

"They're a penny apiece to-day," said Frank, coolly, opening the box and drawing one up from the row, but keeping it well out of the other's reach.

"You're an old robber!" said Race, making no move to take the cigarette, but eyeing it expectantly. "You don't have to pay that much for them."

"Very true, my son," agreed Frank, arrogantly, "but I'll not part with them for any less. If you want them for what I pay, trot up to Bailey's and buy them for yourself. That would let loose a pretty cage of monkeys, eh? You see, when you fellows don't dare to buy them in the regular market, you have to pay a broker, that's me, to do it for you."

"Let us have them three for two cents," begged Race.

"Nope," insisted Frank; "not enough profit to pay for the risk. Do you want it or don't you?"

Race made a show of hunting his clothes

through, and finally lighted upon the coin he had put in his pocket for this very purpose. He handed it to Frank grudgingly and received the cigarette. After all, he was a bit eager to try it again. Perhaps this one would not upset him as the others had. He hoped it would satisfy a queer sort of hungry feeling that nothing else touched.

As soon as Race was safely launched, Frank turned his attention to Bob.

“How 'bout it, Bob? Do you feel the need of a quiet smoke?” he asked.

Bob apparently felt the need of keeping up with the procession. He picked himself up and came over without a word, laid a cent in Frank's ready hand and received his weed. Frank helped him light it from the last spark of his own and stood up to survey the two novices.

“Not so strong, Bob, you'll have it all burnt up in no time. Draw easy and get your money's worth. Race has the idea. Ever try swallowing the smoke? Oh, Roy, I forgot about you! Here, have a smoke. I'll let you have a couple at cost, two for a cent,

seeing you're the guest of honor. What do you say?"

"I don't smoke," said Roy, coming to stand beside Frank, "and I think you'd better cut it out, too, if you want to amount to anything."

"Listen to the preacher," laughed Frank, slapping the boy roughly on the shoulder. "Why, bless you, little one, General Grant smoked, and he amounted to something, I shouldn't wonder."

"He didn't smoke cigarettes, and anyway he wasn't very tall. I don't intend to smoke till I'm twenty-one, if I do at all. A fellow ought to give himself all the advantage he can," averred Roy, moving over to the tree and leaning his back against it, in consideration of his smarting shoulder.

Frank followed and prodded a strong and sharply nailed forefinger against Roy's chest.

"Don't preach, sonny," he admonished sharply. "Nothing makes me so mad as preachin', especially from a young puppy like you who don't know any more than what his mother has told him. That blessed

brother of yours has tried the same tactics before now. If it runs in the family, I'll be sorry I brought you. Race thought you'd be a sport. That's why I let him bring you."

"Race didn't tell me what he was bringing me to," answered Roy, squirming away from the prodding finger. "If it's a smoking party, I can take myself out of your way, and go where the company is more to my taste."

"No, you can't," threatened Frank, at the same moment grabbing Roy's wrist in a vise-like grip; "and don't get sassy about the company, or I'll lick the daylights out o' you. You're with the Romans now and you'll do as the Romans do."

Roy's jerk to release himself accomplished nothing more than to excite from Frank an answering jerk which landed him on the ground, his wrist still held in that ill-tempered clutch. He found himself still further imprisoned by a knee on either side of his body, close up to his arm-pits, and the weight of Frank's muscular body atop his stomach.

"Now what do you say, Mr. Granny!

Think you'll walk off and leave the bunch, do you? Where's your muscle! I'm as strong as you are, if I do smoke, and perhaps a mite stronger. No, you don't!" for Roy was making vain attempts to free himself.

For a few minutes, Frank was content to sit and gloat over his victim, a malicious light creeping over his face.

"You're altogether too dainty a young gentleman," he decided at last, "and I've half a mind to make a man of you. Yes, I think you need a little course of training."

Reaching his free hand into his pocket, Frank drew forth the cigarette box.

"You needn't mind to pay me for this in advance. I'll collect afterward," he laughed, cuttingly. "Here, take this in your ruby lips."

Roy shut his lips resolutely and rolled his head from side to side to avoid the cigarette, no more, perhaps, than the dirty fingers of his tormentor. The odds were against him, however, and Frank was in no courteous frame of mind. The claw-like nails at last

brought forth an involuntary cry, and Roy's parted lips closed over the cigarette.

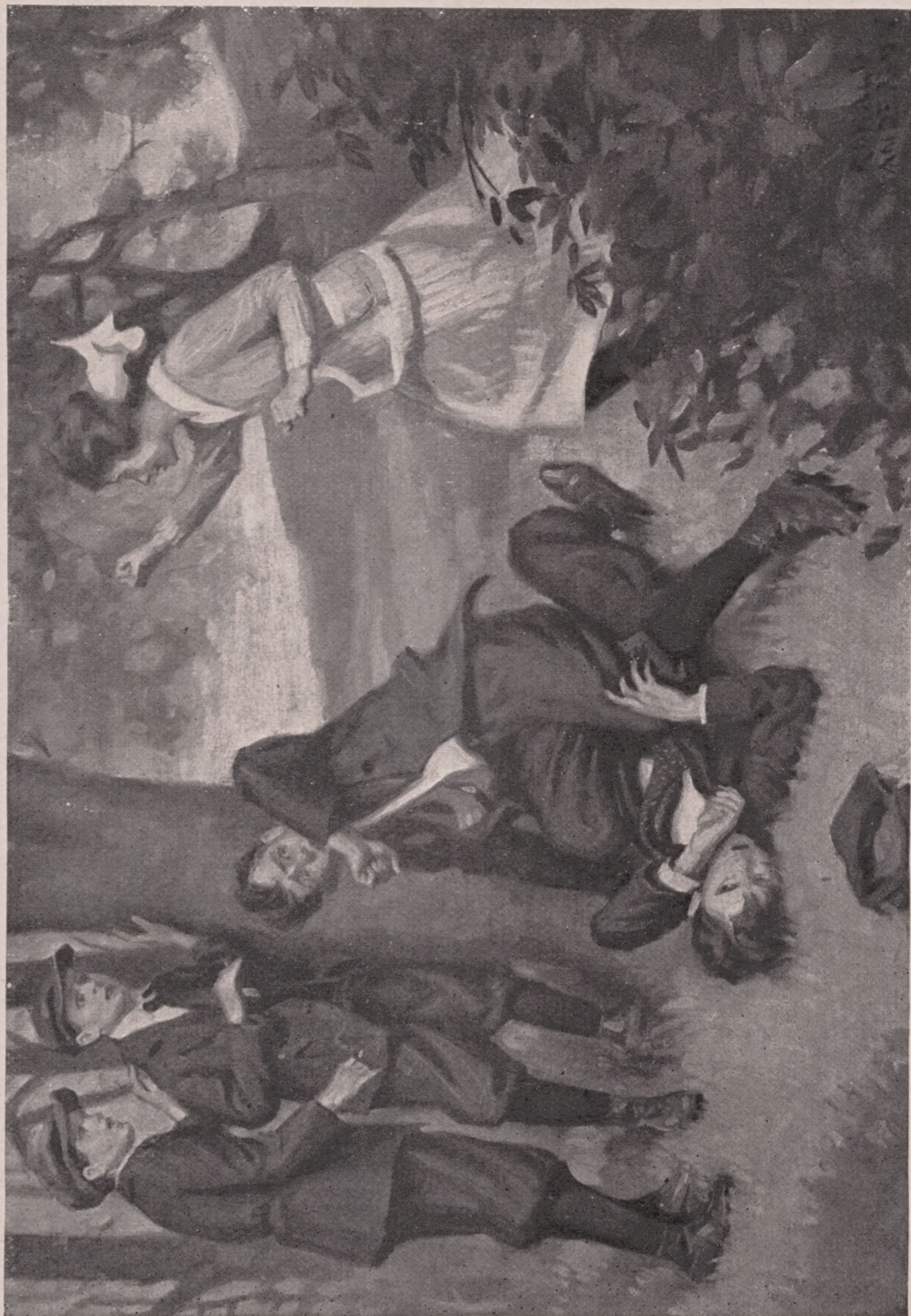
At this moment Frank's attention was arrested by a sound behind him. Rising to investigate, he was met, half up and half down, by what he took to be a fury let loose from limbo, which hurled itself upon him and went crashing with him down to the protruding roots of the hickory tree. Not even Race and Bob, who had seen her coming, could leap in time to prevent Hale's attack.

Roy, finding himself free, scrambled up and sprang to put himself between his cousin and the wrath of the assailed bully. A moment's observation, however, proved that Hale's work had removed that need. Frank lay writhing in pain, between swearing and crying, and, though furiously angry, quite helpless to retaliate.

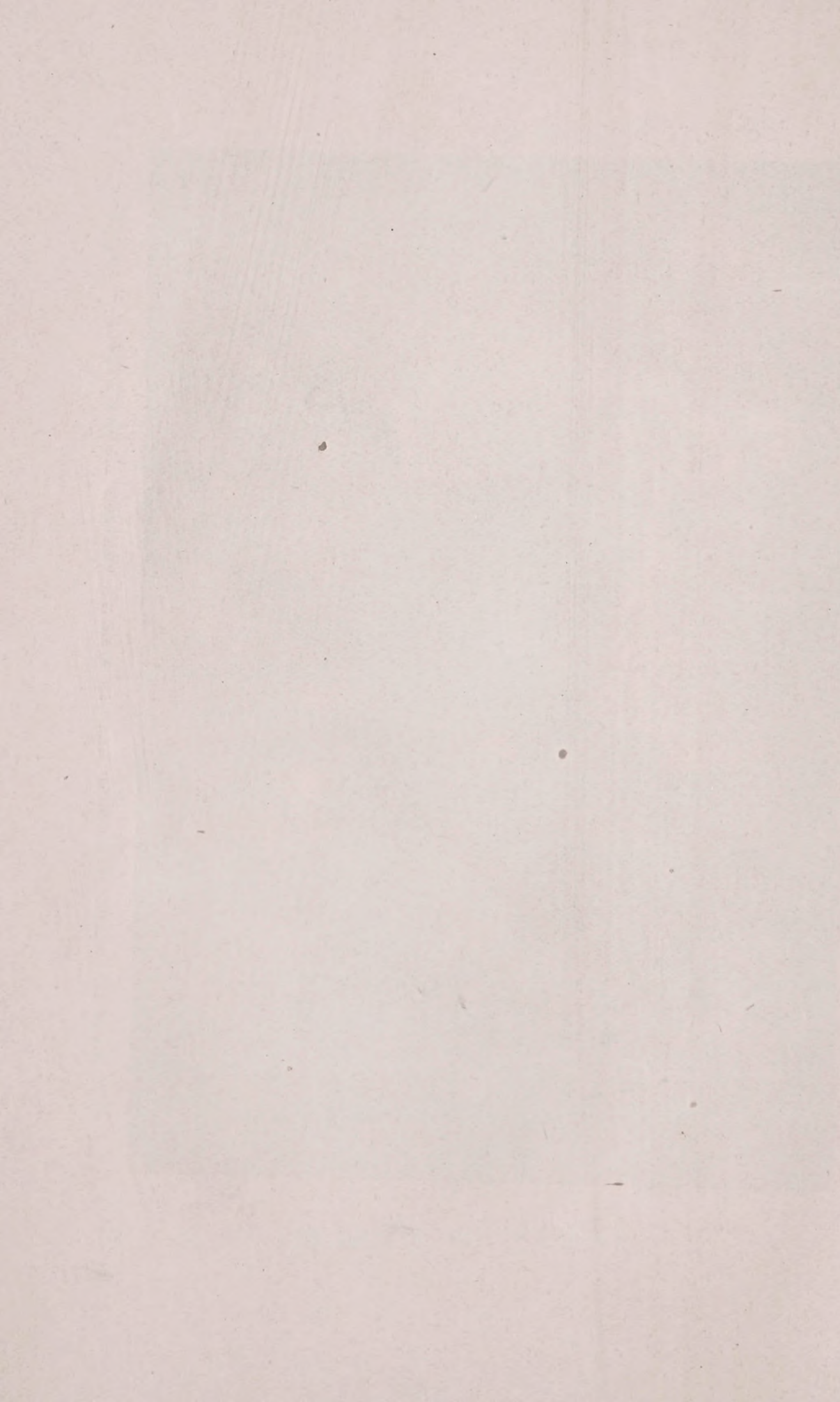
Hale, terrified at the success of her onslaught, and for the moment unaware of the boy's helplessness or of any hurt to herself, jumped up and clung trembling to Roy's arm.

"Don't let him kill me, Roy," she begged.

The other lads closed around her.



NOT EVEN RACE AND BOB COULD LEAP IN TIME TO PREVENT HALE'S ATTACK. — Page 176.



“He can’t hurt you, Hale; see, he is down and out.”

They soon became aware that Frank’s difficulty was more than an ordinary hurt. He was completely transformed from a swaggering bully to a whimpering craven, moaning piteously among the leaves.

“What is it, Frank old man?” asked Race, kneeling beside him.

“It’s my arm. I guess she broke it,” panted Frank, through white lips. He attempted to lift the arm, but succeeded only in adding fresh torture to his already sufficient misery. “Get me to a doctor, can’t you?”

“Roy knows first aid,” said Race, comfortingly; “he’ll fix you up.”

It was a matter of some minutes to persuade Frank to submit to any attention from Roy, his resentment against Hale being so strong it included all members of her family; but his misery served to weaken his resolution and he at last submitted.

Roy went to work in a business-like way to prepare the necessary splint and band-

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ages, calling into use all the handkerchiefs in the party, except Hale's. This little square of linen was already working in another capacity, for the moment Hale realized what had happened she assumed the office of nurse without delay. Long training with her mother had taught her many things that can be done to make a sufferer more comfortable.

She ran down to the river bank, found the old bailing tin in the bottom of the boat, and returned with it full of water. Kneeling by the boy, she took off her sweater and made it into a pillow for his head. Then she dipped her handkerchief in the water and bathed his face.

The coolness was a welcome refreshment, and Frank murmured his relief; but opening his eyes and seeing who it was that brought it, he scowled and tried to move his head away. The effort was too painful, so he lay still.

"Please try to forgive me, Frank," implored Hale, as she continued to cool the handkerchief and refresh his face; "I didn't know I was going to knock you over. I am

dreadfully sorry I have hurt you. There, it will be better soon. Of course, you can't forgive me yet, you feel so bad, but try to believe I didn't think of hurting you like this."

Frank lay with closed eyes and rigid lips. He was not in a forgiving mood certainly. Hale could understand that. She did what she could to keep him easy while Roy applied his bandage and the boys discussed plans for getting him to town.

The boat was deemed out of the question, and it was finally decided that Bob should go up to the road and hail the first automobile he should see. Frank was helped up to a sitting position and propped against the tree to get the "swim" out of his eyes, so he could walk out to the road.

It was about this time that one of them discovered Hale's bruise. It was an ugly black swelling over her right eye.

"I thought I felt a little dizzy," she admitted, feeling of it gingerly. "It isn't much, I guess. I'll bathe it."

She went to the river for fresh water and stayed there till the boys were ready to prop

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Frank out to the road. When she saw them starting she came running up to them and held out her hand to Frank.

“I’m not going up to the road, because it’s just as well that nobody knew I was mixed up in this. I shall never tell that I knocked you down, if you’d rather not have it known. I have my punishment here,” she pointed to her forehead, “if that’s any satisfaction to you.”

Frank was surprised into taking her hand, which he dropped again immediately. He thought hand-shaking a very embarrassing ceremony; but it was a relief to know that she wasn’t going to glory over his downfall. He was half displeased with himself to find that his resentment against Hale had been practically washed away by her gentle touch. His self-respect seemed to demand a certain amount of resentment to feed upon. The unsettled state of his emotions annoyed him.

“Do as you please about that,” he said gruffly.

“You wait here, Hale, till I see Frank

safely aboard the auto," said Roy; "then I'll take the boat back where it belongs and land you opposite Grandmother's."

CHAPTER XV

AUNT ALICE INVESTIGATES

WHEN Hale had so confidently promised to keep her part in the scrimmage a secret, she had not reckoned with her aunt.

It was quite natural that an explanation should be demanded when Hale appeared at supper with her bruised forehead. All her efforts to conceal it had been fruitless. She had tried cold water and hot water in turn; she had powdered it freely; she had tried to comb her hair low to cover it; the discoloration persisted in being conspicuous.

“What have you done to your forehead, Hale?” asked Aunt Alice in a tone more annoyed than sympathetic.

“I fell against a hickory-tree and bruised it,” said Hale, hoping the answer would suffice.

“How did you manage to be so awkward?”

“I was jumping and I didn’t land just right.”

“Jumping!” repeated Aunt Alice. “I think you are too big a girl to go jumping around hickory-trees. Were you alone?”

“Roy was there.”

“Roy! What were you doing, playing a game? Was Roy jumping, too?”

“No, Aunt Alice.”

“Why not be more explicit? Tell us just what you were doing and what happened. You’re talkative enough at times.”

“I can’t tell you any more, Aunt Alice. I promised I wouldn’t.”

“Promised Roy?”

Hale saw her mistake.

“No, there were other—people there.”

Scenting a mystery did not tend to make Miss Merrill less keen on the chase.

“Hale, you must certainly explain what you are talking about.”

“I’m not talking about anything, Aunt Alice. I have told you all I am at liberty to tell.”

"Are you ashamed to tell?" suggested her aunt.

"No, Aunt Alice."

"What nonsense then! You shouldn't make promises like that."

For the time being no more was said on the subject of the bruise and its cause; but another session was in store for Hale before her aunt was done with the question.

Hale ate very little supper and went to bed soon after, for her head was most uncomfortable. She reviewed the conversation with her aunt, as she lay composing herself for sleep, and hoped there would be no more to answer on that score.

"I simply won't tell, no matter what she does to me," she declared.

The door opened and her aunt turned on the light.

"Don't you want a damp cloth on your head?" she asked.

"I have one, thank you."

"So you have."

Then, without further preliminary, Miss Merrill renewed her efforts.

“Hale, it’s all nonsense for you to make a secret of a thing like this. You would better tell me before I call up Roy and find out from him.”

Hale sat up in bed, letting the damp cloth fall unheeded on the pillow. She stared at her aunt in astonishment.

“If you do that I shall think you are—dishonorable,” she said.

It was as if Hale had three eyes, the bruise staring unwinkingly, the eye beneath it very light by contrast, and the other glowing dark with indignation. For a moment Miss Merrill stood transfixed; then her self-respect called for action.

“Lie down, Hale,” she ordered. “Now listen to me.” Hale closed her visible eye. “Do you realize that while your father is away I am your guardian and responsible for your welfare?”

“Yes, Aunt Alice.”

“And do you realize that you are expected to obey me as you would your father if he were here?”

“My father would not try to make me

break a promise," remarked Hale, quietly.

"How would he, or how shall I, know that the promise was not better broken than kept?"

"He would trust me."

"How can you be sure it isn't wiser to break it?"

"Because I know all the circumstances. It is nothing to you or to me, but a great deal to some one else that I should keep this promise. You can pump me a hundred years, and punish me, if you like, but I'll never tell unless he tells first."

"He!" repeated Miss Merrill, pouncing upon the word. "You have made some kind of a promise to a common boy, and now you're ashamed to tell."

Hale commanded her patience with an effort. "The boy is common enough, I'll admit, but there's no shame in the promise, and I've said all I'm going to say."

This proved to be true, for Miss Merrill could get no further reply to her questions. She left Hale's room with much the same baffled feeling she had experienced years be-

fore in that quarrel with her brother of which Hale had been able to learn so little.

It is always hard to say just how words and actions work subconsciously in one's mind and finally show results. Miss Merrill never cared to linger long over the memory of her unguarded remark to Hale about her mother, yet it would bob up and surprise her at times, as she discovered new phases of Hale's character.

A certain sense of justice, long neglected, was beginning to shake her faith in the part she had acted in that old quarrel. For many years she had been content to hug her own opinion to her heart in unreasoning certainty. It annoyed her to find she now seemed to need proofs that her judgments had been correct.

Upon leaving Hale's room, Miss Merrill determined to set about getting her proofs at once. She went to her desk and wrote a letter, addressed it with a name that would have surprised Hale, and went to the post-office to mail it herself.

Being in the village, she decided to run in and see her sister a few minutes.

Mrs. Hammond greeted her sister from the stairway. The greeting was interrupted by a sniff and a question.

“Do I smell witch-hazel?”

“I guess you do,” said Mrs. Hammond. “I have been rubbing Roy’s arm. He lamed it a little this afternoon.”

“How?”

“He and Frank Parsons had a disagreement about cigarettes.”

“Cigarettes!” gasped Miss Merrill.

“You needn’t be alarmed, Alice. Roy won’t smoke till he is older, if he does then. He has promised to let his father light the match when he feels he must have his first smoke. I can trust him for that.”

Miss Merrill was not thinking of Roy, however. She pleaded work at home as an excuse to get away from her sister’s, declaring she had only stepped in to see if they were all well. She must go.

Once out again in the dark, she turned in the opposite direction from home and walked rapidly toward a block of houses called the tenements. She could hardly walk fast

enough to keep up with her thoughts; sometimes she spoke half audibly.

She would ferret this thing out if it took the last ounce of strength she had. If that Parsons boy had made Hale smoke cigarettes and exacted a promise from her not to tell, she would have him horsewhipped, if she had to do it herself. No knowing how venture-some Hale might be along those lines. She might talk about her father trusting her and all that, but there was the child's mother to consider. No knowing how blood will tell.

Her imperative knock at the Parsons' door was answered by Frank's mother.

"Why, Miss Merrill, who'd 'a' thought to see you here!" she said, swinging the door back to reveal a stuffy, untidy room into which Miss Merrill stepped with the manner of a general who brooks no delays nor evasions.

A group of small children broke away from the old lounge on which Frank was lying, his bandaged arm and its unwieldy splint having been the center of interest. The boy half rose to greet the guest, supposing it to be one

of the neighbors to inquire for his injury.

Seeing his mistake, his first thought was that Hale had told. He felt a queer sense of disappointment quite new in his experience, a sense of having lost a friend. He was relieved, then, to hear Miss Merrill's first question.

"Are you hurt, too?"

"Well, yes, I am, a little," he answered, smiling nervously. "Just a broken arm."

"I never!" exclaimed Miss Merrill. "First it's Hale, and then it's Roy, and now you. I should like to know what happened to you all."

"Didn't Hale tell?" asked Frank, eyeing her steadily.

"No, and I imagine you know why. She made you a promise, didn't she?"

"Well, yes, she did," admitted Frank; "and she kept it, did she?"

"Yes; but if she smoked a cigarette because you made her do it, I want to know it, promise or no promise. You are to answer me that."

Frank looked sheepishly at his mother, to

whom this cigarette business was all new. She was too busy with her big family and her outside work to do more than clothe and feed her eldest son. His moral welfare was quite beyond her, she admitted. The broken arm had been explained to her as an accident, which was true enough as far as it went.

Frank Parsons was not accustomed to explain his acts to any one. A sullen silence was much more in his line, let people fuss and fume as much as they liked about what he had done. This was, however, a little different. Perhaps it was the novelty of being able to deny a charge against him that made him willing to speak on this occasion.

To give Frank the credit due him, it was really something more than that. He had a boy's sense of justice, after all, and he felt it would be mean to let Hale's generous promise be twisted as her aunt was twisting it. So he told as much of the afternoon's history as pertained to Roy and Hale.

"None of your goody-goody preachin' for that girl," he ended, with spirit; "a regular knock-down-and-drag-out blow she dealt me,

and I'm darned if I don't think she's a plucky little kid."

Miss Merrill had much food for thought as she went slowly home. It was not altogether soothing to feel that she had doubted Hale's motives. It savored too much of the old snarl of doubt that had entangled her years ago and kept her unhappy ever since. She resolved to say nothing to Hale about her visit to Frank. If the child wanted to keep her promise, let her have the satisfaction of thinking it was a secret.

CHAPTER XVI

A BIG UNDERTAKING

“**H**AVE you a minute to spare?” asked Forest, popping his head into Mr. Stickney’s office late one afternoon in November, after a round of lessons in the grade rooms of the building.

“As many as you like,” was the hearty reply. “Speak on, thy servant heareth.”

“You think I am always asking you favors,” said Forest, good-naturedly, “and perhaps you have good grounds for that opinion. I’m here now for a like offense.”

“I knew it by the look in your eye. Take a chair. Your ideas have been good ones so far, and I foresee that I shall be falling into line on this one, if it is anything I can help you do.”

“It surely is! Indeed, it could hardly go on without you.”

“Good! What is it?”

“A Community Christmas,” said Forest; “ever hear of one?”

“Not that I remember.”

“You’d remember it if you ever heard of it,” Forest assured him. “I heard through a friend of mine who helped celebrate that way last year, and I am very eager to try one on in Hawthorne.”

“Tell me about it,” suggested Mr. Stickney, looking with admiration at the younger man’s earnest boyish face, alight with the vision of his new plans. Few young men, he thought, were so alive to the community spirit, so little absorbed in their own personal affairs.

“The idea of a Community Christmas is to get the whole town interested in one thing, to steer the festival away from selfish home celebrations, which are all very pleasant for the rich and the light-hearted, but only make the lot of the poor and the sad seem more miserable by contrast. In the one I heard about there was a big outdoor tree in the public square, a pageant acted by the young

people, and a tour of the town by groups of carol singers to take the Christmas spirit and a bit of melody to old people and shut-ins."

Mr. Stickney nodded slowly.

"That sounds interesting; but it also sounds like a big undertaking. I suppose the tree necessitates trinkets for all the children and bags of candy and such fixings."

"No; that's just the part we ought to leave out. If the tree merely stands for popped-corn and candy, it will have no advantage over the regulation home tree. This tree will have nothing on it but lights, something beautiful to gather round and look at, nothing to tear off and throw around."

"I see," said Mr. Stickney, still nodding.

"And the pageant, what's your idea? We can't get the whole town into the hall."

"We don't want to. The pageant must be acted outdoors, under the stars, where everybody will see and enjoy it. Don't you think that sounds more Christmas-like than any church-vestry affair you ever heard of?"

"Yes, it does, and I am in for it heart and

soul," promised Mr. Stickney, letting his enthusiasm shine out to meet Forest's. "There is a tremendous amount of work to be done, and we ought to get started at once if we expect to do it right."

"Good!" cried Forest, springing up to get paper and pencil. "You're the most satisfactory pal a poor music-teacher ever had. It is going to be a lot of work, but together we can manage it."

"It's my impression that if we want to make the most of the idea we must involve as many people as possible. It shouldn't be a small-group affair," suggested Mr. Stickney.

"Right again," agreed Forest, "I was going to speak of that. Now, see; I have put on these four sheets of paper the headings for the four divisions of the celebration,—Tree, Pageant, Carols, and Gifts."

"Gifts?" questioned Mr. Stickney.

"Yes. Not for the tree, but for quiet distribution among the really needy of the town. Mr. McAllister knows most about that branch of the work, so we'll put him down for chair-

man. I want the direction of the carols, so I'll just naturally help myself to that job, and give you the office of Chairman of the Pageant."

"This seems to be sort of a close corporation," laughed Mr. Stickney, "the way we take the high offices for ourselves."

"Don't fret; nobody else wants them very ravenously. Now for the tree committee, I hope we can persuade Matt Jarvis to be chairman. He has a well-concealed desire to be active in such affairs, but he's so quiet and diffident that nobody ever thinks of asking him. This won't necessitate his being conspicuous and will please him, I know."

"That's a good suggestion," agreed Mr. Stickney; then drawing toward him the paper bearing the caption, "Pageant," he added gravely, "This rather scares me. I know nothing about pageants except in a general way. Isn't it necessary to know a good deal about costumes and lighting and acting and dancing? I tell you, Lad, it scares me."

"There's where your committee must be

wisely selected and set immediately to work. The pageant has to be written first."

"Written! Man alive! What am I in for?" Mr. Stickney looked aghast at the idea.

"No doubt we could find a pageant ready made," admitted Forest, hugely enjoying his friend's amazement; "but I have set my heart on an original production, to make it more truly a home-town affair. I surmise that Faith Mason can help us in this quarter. You know that girl's head is always busy with plots and ideas. You don't have to do the work yourself, only see that it is done, remember. You can help with the coaching. Then for lights, Morton Baker is taking a course in stagecraft that ought to unfold all the mysteries of lighting that you could possibly need. Costumes are a pet hobby with Mrs. Porter. The dancing should be delegated to a professional, of course; so that goes to Miss Carter. So there you are! Just see that they work together and get the results you want."

"Quite a four-in-hand you have given into

the hands of a novice!” laughed Mr. Stickney. “Forest, lad, you are hopelessly and incurably enthusiastic!”

“Not a bit more so than you are, only you’re trying to conceal it. Own up now! Don’t you think it is a grand idea?”

“Yes, honestly, I do. Let’s get what we’ve said on paper.”

They went to work on the framing of plans, jotting down such details as suggested themselves.

“Do you realize that all this is going to cost a considerable amount? Have you thought of that?” asked Mr. Stickney.

“Not such a great deal, as I figure it, because we shall expect people to donate their services and their materials. We shall need some funds, of course, for which we’ll circulate a subscription-paper. Let’s ask Judge Crothers to be treasurer.”

Mr. Stickney passed his hands through his hair and tossed it in mock terror.

“The way you move the men and women of this town around is a caution,” he laughed,

stretching vigorously, as if to reach the stature of courage to which Forest had attained.

"It's only on paper and in the air, at present," Forest reminded him, modestly. "We have yet to make the machinery move."

"We'll do it, Lad; we'll do it," prophesied Mr. Stickney, reaching for his hat and picking up his papers. "I'm going to start now, before I cool off. I see there will be a full day's work every day from now till Christmas."

The prophecy was fulfilled in the next six weeks.

Faith Mason was particularly happy in the prospect of writing a pageant. She was taking post-graduate work at the high school and planning for a college course. She was, as Forest had said, always plotting stories and plays.

"I have an outline now that I think will work into some such thing. It has been waiting for the right stimulus. I'll work it into shape and let you see it," she told Mr. Stickney.

Even Judge Crothers fell into step with the procession, after a slight hesitation. The judge was a silent, cold little man whose interests seemed to center wholly within himself. No one but Forest would have thought of suggesting him as treasurer of the subscription fund. The idea was preposterous. No one but Forest had the courage to offer him the post.

“Me? Ask people for money?” queried the wizened lips.

“No, Judge Crothers, we don’t expect you to ask for the money. We want you to be treasurer and receive the money that comes in. We’ll appoint collectors and have them report to you, if you’ll be so kind as to keep the accounts for us. You’ll do that, won’t you?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll do that,” said the judge, adding with an unusual show of interest, “Tell me again, what is the plan?”

Forest detailed the plan as far as it had been worked out and succeeded in getting an honest if not very showy enthusiasm from the judge.

Hale took a lively interest in the pageant. She was chosen for the important rôle of Peace, and she and Faith had a beautiful secret with which to surprise and delight the onlookers at the very end of the play. Her love of things dramatic and her ardent intention of writing plays some day made her look upon Faith as one who had attained an enviable height of bliss.

“You’ll do better than that some day, little girl,” Faith assured her. “With your ideas, I see you will do wonderfully in time. Why! that last business—the secret, you know—that’s a big idea and that was all your own, you must remember. I wish I could claim it.”

For the time, the Dramatic Club was forced into the background and suspended its sessions by common consent, as its members were all involved in the more important undertaking.

Hale would have talked and thought of nothing but the pageant, had not Aunt Alice wearied of the subject and reminded her of more mundane things. But even Aunt Alice

was unusually interested in the big celebration, and her executive talents helped to shape it to a finished whole.

CHAPTER XVII

PREPARATIONS

TO persons who have never worked out the plan for a Community celebration for Christmas, it would be a surprise to see how far-reaching the effects are. It surprised all the people in Hawthorne not a little.

In the first place, the carol-practice called out singers, both young and old, good, indifferent, and worse, and became more popular than the movies. It was well-nigh inspiring to hear Tom Folsom, who had led the Baptist choir for years upon end, booming out his accurate bass for the instruction of the high-school boys, who knew practically nothing about the old music; it was thrilling to hear the sopranos soar up to the heights on the wings of Clara Varney's trained voice.

Forest never had a more interesting job in all his life. His regular music work in the

school was veered into carol-practice; so was the high-school orchestra work. Anything and everything to swell the chorus.

The pageant work, though less noisy, was running deep and strong in its several departments. To design and cut and make the costumes demanded the labor of many fingers. It was fairly pathetic to see how some of the people who seldom found their talents in demand rejoiced to be given a share in the work.

In the making and welding of new friendships between people thus brought together lay one of the finest results of the Community Christmas idea. Almost every one who had any connection with the work found a new channel for friendship in one direction or another, even to the cold little judge who held the funds.

There were some who sadly needed these new friendships. One of these was old Auntie Bartlett, who lived close up to the edge of the mountain and felt that the life of the village would never touch her closely again.

She was surprised one day to receive a call from Faith and Hale on pageant business.

"Do you want to work for the pageant?" asked Faith, after she had explained who she was and who Hale was.

"What is that?" asked Auntie Bartlett, in puzzled alarm, "not a new kind of disease, I hope?"

"No, indeed," laughed Faith. "It's a play for Christmas Eve. We have to have some costumes made and we are getting every one who can sew a stitch to help make them. These are for the angels. I have pinned this one together to show you how it goes and I have brought you six others to make the same way."

Auntie Bartlett's lips trembled, and her eyes grew moist with emotion.

"I'd love to do it," she managed to say and then turned abruptly away to hide her happy tears in a search for her thimble.

"Show me, now, just how it goes," she said, returning.

Faith held up the soft folds of cheese-cloth and showed her where they were pinned. She

laid the costume over Hale's shoulders to make the explanation clearer.

"Lovely!" cried Auntie Bartlett, standing back with clasped hands. "I do love to make pretty things. And these, you say, are angels' robes. Think of working for the angels!"

The idea quite delighted the lonely old woman who had no more tangible companionship than that of angels for the greater part of her days.

"You must come to town and see the play on Christmas Eve," Faith said. "There will be a tree and carol-singing besides. I'm sure you'll like it."

"My stars! I should say I would. But how in conscience can I get there?"

"We'll find a way. I'm sure it can be done."

Auntie Bartlett was most grateful for the promise. She couldn't think of letting them go without having some of her dainty cakes and a cup of hot chocolate to keep the cold at bay during their long walk back to the village.

Hale was surprised, and she learned after-

ward that Faith was, too, to find such dainty china and rich linen in the little mountain cottage. She later learned from Grandmother that Mrs. Bartlett had lived in the village during her husband's lifetime and had enjoyed a comfortable income. Upon his death, she had discovered that her resources were rather slender and had retired to the remote cottage, which was her own from her father's estate, where she could live quietly and frugally. Grandmother owned that the village had rather neglected the poor soul, who in her younger days had been interested in the topics of the day and in the affairs of the village.

Of course, the first visit demanded a second one, to get the finished robes; and this one Hale made alone. She lingered to chat with the lonely woman who could hardly let her go even after an hour.

"It's getting late," protested Hale, "and if it's dark before I get home, Grandmother will worry."

"To be sure! I know I must let you go,

but I do hate to, and that's a fact. Do say you'll come again."

"Yes, I'll come again," promised Hale; "I'd love to after this Christmas rush is over. In the meantime, you are coming to see the pageant. Mrs. Porter will send her auto up to get you and you shall sit in it all snug and warm to see the fun. Please don't disappoint us, for I have a lovely surprise at the end that I want you to see."

Auntie Bartlett laughed.

"I'll not disappoint you. More'n likely, if you were to drop in here at four o'clock the day before Christmas, you'd find me all ready, sitting here waiting, sewing, no doubt, so's not to waste a minute, but bobbing up every few minutes to look down the road for the auto, though I know perfectly well it isn't due till half-past six. You've no cause to worry about me disappointing you."

Thus did the ripples from the big idea spread into far nooks and corners, and move the dull shallows of many a quiet life.

As for Hale, for the first time in her life

she felt herself to be a part of the community in which she lived. The lonesomeness of the country as she had felt it in early September was a fast-fading memory by the middle of December.

CHAPTER XVIII

A COMMUNITY CHRISTMAS

CHRISTMAS EVE, so eagerly awaited and so diligently worked for, was a disappointment in one respect. The one thing that could happen to disturb the arrangements began to happen about the time the tree was lighted.

All afternoon the weather had received an undue share of attention and conversation.

“What if it snows?” had been the query from mouth to mouth as people met under gray skies that had threatened all day.

“That would be a tragedy, after all our preparations.”

Everywhere it was spoken of as “our preparations,” and few indeed were the people who could not honestly claim a share in them. Nothing in Hawthorne had ever been so much a town celebration.

No wonder, then, that in the midst of the

last preparations many anxious eyes should turn to the clouds and the united prayer of the people should be, "I hope it won't snow."

It did snow, however. The first flakes that starred the dark overcoats in the crowd brought forth a dismal groan, which was so spontaneous and yet in unison that it was immediately succeeded by a laugh quite as united and spontaneous. The atmosphere being thus cleared of ill feeling, the people began to think it was rather nice than otherwise to have this natural addition to the stage setting.

The crowd on the common was an interesting factor of the occasion. To Forest, who stood with Mr. Stickney in a wing of the temporary stage, it was the most interesting feature of the celebration.

"That's what I've been working for all these weeks," he told the principal. "Just to see a crowd like that gathered to enjoy something beautiful together is worth all the time and effort of the work. I hope we have our carols in hand. It would be dreadful to disappoint that crowd."

“They are a pretty happy-looking crowd,” commented Mr. Stickney; “I don’t know who’s happier, the ones who do the work or the ones who witness the results.”

“Well, I do!” declared Forest. “I know I am a lot happier than some one who has just come to look on. I’ve seen the work develop and had a hand in it. There’s no question in my mind, nor in yours, either, I feel sure.”

Faith joined them a moment.

“Joe is turning on the lights in just a minute,” she said. “Are you ready for the orchestra?”

“The minute the tree is lighted I’ll be ready for the orchestra. There it goes!” Forest vanished down the steps.

The tree blossomed out into a hundred gleaming points, and the crowd gave forth a cheer followed by prolonged applause. The moment it died away, Forest, in a little pen close under the edge of the stage, lifted his baton and sent the orchestra crashing into the Hallelujah Chorus.

The crowd, being thus called to attention,

turned toward the stage and drew close for the carol-singing. Massed close to the pen was the faithful chorus that had studied these six weeks and knew the carols best. Out in the main circle of the throng the boys had been passing slips with the printed stanzas. When the orchestra had finished their selection, Mr. Stickney made some announcements, giving a return of thanks to all who had cooperated to make the celebration a success, and closing with the request that all join in the singing.

The program opened with "Silent Night." The trained choir close to the orchestra and to Forest's baton gave a good body of sound for the less confident to cling to. If it wasn't everybody's celebration before, it now became so. Those who thought they couldn't sing hummed a little, sure of escaping attention in the volume of sound.

When the carol program had been completed, there was only a momentary delay before the pageant was opened by a shepherd strolling in with a dog. Presently three or four others followed and seated themselves

beside the first upon the ground. The orchestra, playing softly, dreamily, supplemented the action as the shepherds, folding their rough coats about them, lay down to sleep and left the dogs on watch. Gradually the stage grew dim.

Presently a light shone brightly in upon the group of shepherds, arousing them one by one, and music coming softly from far away grew more distinct as it drew near. The light which shone upon them, making them afraid, was seen to take form as an angel. The transformation was produced by a clever manipulation of lights and was considered by the young people as a triumph of stage art. It was only one of the many surprising contributions that the lanky Morton Baker had submitted as his part of the preparations.

"It goes to show," Forest had declared in jubilation, "that in a town like this there is some one to tell you how to do anything you happen to want, if you can only find him."

Miss Blair made a beautiful angel and spoke her lines with clear precision.

“Fear not!”

The hush of the audience deepened as she went on to tell what had happened in Bethlehem and where the Babe would be found. As soon as the annunciation was finished, the angel host came into view, flooding the air with melody. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

The words and action followed closely the Gospel narrative. As the shepherds prepared to “go even unto Bethlehem,” the lights were dimmed to total darkness. When next they appeared, it was to light the rude stable scene which had been ready and waiting behind the drop.

The manger scene was wholly pantomime, except that the baby, wakened from a nap by the moist kisses of one of the dogs, gave a startled cry and then subsided under the soothing reassurance of its mother.

A period of darkness followed the visit of the shepherds. When the light came again, it came as a daybreak, slowly, and through the open doorway, where lately the shepherds had taken their departure, were now seen

approaching the Wise Men from the East. They bowed before the infant King and presented their gifts, which the Madonna accepted graciously on her son's behalf. The first act ended with the departure of the Wise Men.

The throng on the common gave a generous measure of applause, both vocal and manual. Forest, standing ready with uplifted baton, started the orchestra into another round of carols while the stage hands worked with a fair degree of speed to prepare for the second act.

Hale came to help Faith with the decorations.

"You ought to be the proudest girl in the world, Faith."

"I am," confessed Faith over a mouthful of pins with which she was fastening up sprigs of holly. "Hold that right there a minute. Didn't Miss Blair look every inch an angel! And wasn't it darling of the baby to cry that way! It showed he was alive and the people liked it."

"They liked all of it," agreed Hale.

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“They’ll love what you are going to do the last thing best of all. What are they laughing at out there? Ask Joe.”

“Santa Claus has been out in full regalia to sweep the snow off the platform so the dancers won’t slip in it,” said Joe Pratt, coming in to see if they were about ready to have the lights turned on.

“This part is all ready,” said Faith, standing back to get the effect of her decorations. “How about the outside scene?”

“All ready and waiting,” said Joe. “Keep back there, youngsters; don’t let your heads show till it’s time.”

Stepping over the numerous small-fry in his path, Joe turned on the lights and signaled to the curtain man.

The outside scene showed a poorly furnished attic room in which a woman sat sewing a billowy mass of white tarlatan. Her six hungry-looking children were making what fun they could out of a broken doll and a ragged picture-book.

Presently the dress was finished and the woman shook it out and held it up for inspec-

tion. The children left their play and clustered around. One little girl begged leave to try on the dress. The mother yielded to her own and the child's desire and slipped the dress over her head. All stood about in admiration.

"Sing 'Money Musk,' " begged the child.

The mother sang with full support from the orchestra and the child danced beautifully while the others gaped and admired.

The dance ended, the dress was taken off and folded into a box to be sent to its rightful owner. Two of the children were sent to deliver it.

The poor family disappeared from the scene as the drop was lifted to show the Christmas festivities of a wealthy family. A father and mother and child were grouped about a Christmas-tree from which the gifts had been stripped. The little girl was cross and fretful after the excitement of the day. Her toys pleased her for only a moment and she even expressed displeasure with some of them.

Into this group came the poor children

bringing the tarlatan frock. When the mother shook it out and examined it, the little girl left her toys to give attention to the new attraction. Left to themselves while the family was intent upon the dress, the two little starvelings drew near to the discarded toys and ventured to pick up one or two. They were discovered and accused of meddling.

The children shrank in fear from their accusers and retreated toward the door. Then, mindful of their mother's instruction, they asked for the money due on the dress.

The wealthy father investigated his purse. His bank notes were all too big to pay the small amount. They would have to come again or he could send it to-morrow when the banks were open. The timid murmur of "She needs the money," was overpowered by the careless statement, "She'll have it to-morrow, I tell you." So the children departed without the money amid the disgusted expressions of the group regarding the avarice of poor people.

The drop, coming into use, showed the poor

room again, to which the children returned, sorrowful and hungry. Their mother asked for the money, but it was not forthcoming, and she could merely set out for their Christmas dinner part of a loaf of bread which she divided equally among them. She lightened the unhappy atmosphere with a story of make-believe, through which the children saw their plain dry bread as delectable cake which needed no butter, and their simple glass of water as rich milk that makes boys and girls grow stout and strong.

Then they gathered round her knee for the Christmas story of long ago, in which the weight of emphasis was placed upon the humble beginning of the life of the Prince of Peace.

“We have peace, my children, in knowing that we have not been unkind to each other or to any fellow creature, and in knowing that God loves us and cares for us. If we have not much food to-day, we shall have more to-morrow, and until then we shall not suffer.”

When the children, in answer, urged their claim that all children should have Christmas

presents, she replied that presents do not make children happy, recalling to their minds the fretful child whose toys they saw scattered and neglected at the foot of the tree.

“It is the kind mind that gives peace, my children. It matters not whether the person has all bodily comforts or few blessings that he can measure and count, if he has good will toward men he is at peace, and therefore rich.”

The curtain descending to shut out the little group reminded the attentive audience that the place was Hawthorne and not the cheerless slum of a great city, that the good will which had inspired the Community Christmas had made it impossible for a single child in all Hawthorne to go hungry to bed, at least on Christmas Day. They, therefore, wiped their misty eyes, swallowed the lumps in their throats, and, beating the snow from their shoulders and breasts, sighed with relief and awaited the third act, meanwhile singing the carols.

The last act was Faith's favorite, the act

in which she had let her imagination take full flight.

The scene was laid in the realm of Peace, whose chief attendants are Power and Plenty.

Plenty, in the familiar guise of Santa Claus, sent out a call for the tribes of men to come and be blessed with gifts. While waiting their arrival, the virtues, four-and-twenty little fairies, danced before the throne, led by their sovereign, Peace.

At the end of their dance the first arrival appeared, a woman garbed in the conventional Grecian robe of white, which under the careful manipulation of a spotlight appeared tinged with blue. A dark veil, bandaging her eyes, made her grope for progress, while an impish little figure of Brownie aspect, representing her pet vice or vanity, still further hindered her steps by clinging to her and dragging her out of her course.

Upon her arrival before the throne, the lusty youth named Power made haste to break the spell of her vice,—that is, he resolutely removed the impish figure and bore it strug-

gling away to a spot where he laid it down upon the floor and, by a momentary pressure of his foot upon its chest, signified that it was vanquished.

At the same time, Plenty removed the veil bandage and called to him one of the virtues which he presented to the woman. The woman, now clothed in white, looked up and smiled about her as she received the gift.

The procession of vice-hindered mortals passed slowly before the gift-giver. From each a vice was taken away and a virtue given in exchange, till the happy white-robed company stood massed beside the throne surrounded by a solid wall of virtues. Then the vices made one last attempt to reclaim their former victims. Simultaneously they rose to a sitting position and blinked about them as if to inquire what had happened. Seeing their erstwhile slaves so safely protected by the virtues, they looked impishly at one another for encouragement, scrambled to their feet and, by means of grotesque maneuvers, made repeated attacks against the virtues. These

were repeatedly repulsed by the quietly courageous virtues, till Peace, stepping calmly into their midst, scattered the vices and completed their downfall.

Stepping then to the center front of the stage, Hale had her great moment, the big surprise of the evening. The group of mortals formed a crescent behind her while she recited the closing lines. Honor to herself was the least consideration in Hale's mind. The words were Faith's, and out of love for her friend, Hale meant they should ring out at their best.

“Oh, list then! ye mortals who struggle for Peace
And think ye shall find it in fortune's increase!
Not larger possessions shall answer your need,
Not bounty; but kindness in word and in deed.
Think not to find Peace while your neighbor has
none;

His welfare and yours grow together as one.
When Virtue has triumphed all sorrow shall cease,
For Virtue is Good Will, and Good Will is Peace.”

Raising her hands in a benediction as she spoke the last line, Hale released the secret which had been hers and Faith's all these

weeks. She listened for the gasp of delight she was sure would come, and smiled in contentment to hear it.

From either hand a pure white pigeon circled away through the night and the fast-falling flakes. It was the crowning touch of loveliness. Hale could have wept with emotion at the thrill that passed through the audience.

Other people had surprises, it seemed, for as Faith and Hale stood congratulating each other with misty eyes and smiling lips, Mr. Stickney found them.

"Faith, I'm proud of you," he said, shaking her hand and drawing it through his arm. "I have a publisher for your play. Mr. Wilmer, of Black & Wilmer, is here at my suggestion and he wants to meet you and he wants to buy your play."

The news that Faith had sold the play for publication swept through the crowd and for a while delayed the progress of the schedule. The groups of carolers forgot their assignment to certain spots and rushed pell-mell at Faith to hear all about it. She was the center



RAISING HER HANDS IN A BENEDICTION, HALE RELEASED THE SECRET.

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of a noisy, happy group all trying to tell her how glad they were. Mr. Wilmer on one side and Mr. Stickney on the other saved her from the worst of the jam, bowing and smiling as if the congratulations were theirs as well as Faith's.

At last, Mr. Stickney took command of the situation.

"All to your places!" he said, raising his hand.

The carolers dispersed to their various conveyances and went their separate ways. All Hawthorne was alive with song. Along the snowy roads the torch-lit groups went singing from house to house where aged or infirm people were shut away from all other parts of the community celebration.

Grandmother Merrill was waiting up for Hale when she returned about midnight, with Forest to see her safely home.

"You look as if you had had a good time," commented Grandmother, rejoicing in Hale's bright eyes and rosy cheeks.

"I have, Grandmother; the best time I ever had in my life. I feel as if I love everybody

in this town whether I know them or not."

Grandmother smiled understandingly as she kissed Forest good-night.

"Not a bad feeling to create in one little girl," she told him, "and I suppose it is safe to say that a great many others have known the feeling to-night. I'm glad to remember that you are the original cause of it all, dear boy."

"I don't want anybody to remember that," declared Forest, "for it couldn't have happened without the coöperation of everybody, you know. Think how Hale helped, for example."

"Hale certainly did her part well," spoke up Aunt Alice.

Hale was so astonished by this gracious admission that she almost forgot to be gracious in return. She betrayed her surprise, then murmured a tardy "Thank you."

"How unusual for Aunt Alice to speak like that," she mused, drowsily, as she went upstairs and prepared for bed.

CHAPTER XIX

BOOK MONEY

AFTER seasons of virtue and self-satisfaction, people are apt to suffer a slump of one kind or another. The reason is not far to seek, for such seasons usually involve the neglect of less interesting phases of life.

The Christmas season was hardly over when Hale experienced such a slump. She came down to earth with a thud that startled her and set her to thinking about her shortcomings with more profit than pleasure.

She had known, in a way, that her music was being neglected, but she found it easy to push it aside for the more interesting pageant work. Forest, however, was not content with the results. He was, as he had warned her, a very critical teacher. He could not tolerate careless work.

One day he listened as Hale played her

lesson for him in a spiritless way, repeating mistakes to which he had called her attention in a previous lesson. Then he broke in upon the humdrum with a distressed, "Wait."

Hale looked up and waited.

"What are you hoping to accomplish by taking music lessons?" he asked her.

"I don't know," shrugged Hale, "unless it is to learn to play for my own amusement. I don't expect ever to be a great artist."

"Do you care for good music?" he asked, still looking her through and through with his serious gaze.

"Of course, when some one plays it who knows how."

"Then how can you be content to blunder along and make such poor music all the time!"

"I'm not content," declared Hale. "It gives me no satisfaction whatever. I haven't any talent for it, anyway. I wouldn't care if I gave it up and never took another lesson."

Forest shook his head and sunk his clenched fists deeper into his coat pockets. To tell the truth, he wanted to take Hale by the shoulders

and shake her till she begged for mercy. How could any one sit there and strum out notes as if both heart and hand were lifeless wood!

His steady gaze alarmed Hale. She moved uneasily on the bench and, with a desire to break the silence, began to finger a key or two.

“Stop!” ordered Forest. “Now listen! You go at this work as if you were going to the gallows. It’s all wrong. You say you have no special talent, and you think that’s excuse enough for killing time, just going through the motions. Any one who can learn to read print can learn to read music; and you could do better if you cared to make the effort.”

Hale had never seen her cousin roused like this. It was in her thought to promise better effort, but Forest went on rapidly.

“It’s no use for me to sit and try to listen to such murderous playing. I can’t do it! You have said you would like to give up the lessons. I’m going to give you time to think that over. You know when a lesson is ready

for me, and when it is I'll come and hear it. Till then, I've something better to occupy my time."

He was gone before she could answer.

"Take your old dishes and go 'long. Nobody wants them," she said under her breath.

Forest went straight to his Grandmother.

"I've been telling Hale a few plain facts," he told her, his indignation still glowing warm beneath his self-control. "I have not lost my temper," he added, in answer to her searching gaze. "This thing has been growing more and more unbearable for weeks. I have told her that I shall hear her lesson again when she is sure it's ready. She knows she isn't half trying."

Grandmother Merrill knew that before now Forest had given up pupils for this very reason. She understood his passion for thoroughness, and she knew enough of Hale's nature to see where the trouble lay.

"May I say something to Hale about this?" she asked.

"I'd be glad if you would," he said.

So Grandmother had a little talk with Hale.

“Forest tells me he cut your lesson short to-day,” she began.

“Yes,” said Hale gloomily.

“Are you disappointing him, Hale?”

“Well, dear me! he expects so much! I can’t play everything perfectly the first time I try and he seems to think I ought to.”

“Did he say that?”

“No-o, not exactly, but he said I could do better if I wanted to.”

“And could you?”

“I suppose so!”

“I am sorry to hear you say that,” sighed Grandmother, shaking her head, “for it confirms me in a very unwelcome conclusion I have reached in regard to you. On second thought, I am not going to call it a conclusion, only a half-way station, for I don’t believe you will be willing to leave it that way.”

“What?” asked Hale, really concerned at the serious tone Grandmother used.

“I find that you are apt to do very well the things that you find easy to do—such as reading and play-acting, let us say—and you are content to do only fairly well the things

you have to work a little harder for,—such as your music.”

“Is a person supposed to do everything equally well?” asked Hale in self-defense.

“No, I don’t say that; what I say is that everything you attempt to do ought to receive your best effort. Because you put your whole heart into your reading, you excel in it. It is the lack of heart in your music that makes it a disappointment to Forest. You spend the required amount of time at the piano, at least your body is there, but your thoughts wander. Your fingers will never learn to do their part unless your mind stays right behind them to make them intelligent.”

“O dear! Why can’t we do just the things we like to do, and let the rest go?” pouted Hale.

“We should be too one-sided, if we did that. You haven’t yet thought much about building a character for yourself, but I believe you ought to begin at once. Tackle your music with the idea of mastering every exercise as far as you go, and the result will be better music-lessons and a better mind.”

Hale said very little at the time, and Grandmother was satisfied to let the matter rest without a definite promise from her. The girl's pride had been sharply prodded, however, and she dwelt seriously on the insinuation that she shirked difficult tasks.

To prove to herself that she didn't, she did a week of faithful work and on Tuesday night called Forest by telephone to say she was ready for her lesson next day.

Her reward was in his hearty praise, and from that time there was more pleasure for both of them in the lessons. Hale even suspected him of giving her difficult passages just to test her pluck, and this gave a zest to the work that was quite unknown to the earlier lessons.

"I'd like to hear you play that again," he said at the close of that first satisfactory lesson, "but time is up, and I have to go and hunt up a boy to pump for me while I practise at the church organ. It is the hardest thing to find a boy who, even for the consideration of twenty cents an hour, will stick to the job week in and week out."

Hale, who always had in the back of her thoughts the burden of her book money, grasped at this floating straw.

"Twenty cents an hour?" she repeated. "You wouldn't hire me for the job, would you?"

"What do you want a hard job like that for?"

"I need the money. You know about my books, don't you?"

Forest didn't know, so she told him the heart-breaking news of her folly and its penalty. Forest apologized for laughing at the predicament she was in.

"Is the pumping too hard for my amount of muscle?" she asked, bending her arm to lump her modest showing. "I think I made a little muscle rowing."

"It isn't the strength required, but the patience, I was thinking of. It's not a very interesting job."

"Oh, but the money!" cried Hale tragically. "Think of the money! Wouldn't I gladly be bored to death at the rate of twenty cents an hour, to get those beastly books paid for!"

So the bargain was made and Hale had the pleasure of collecting slowly the coins that were to cover her first business transaction. The pleasure lay chiefly in the money end of it, for she found the job not only uninteresting but hot and tiresome. She learned much, incidentally, about the art of practising, for Forest was patience itself on the bench. Over and over he played one single passage till it satisfied him.

“That makes fifty times!” said Hale, fiercely, one afternoon when her cousin had run long past the allotted hour and become absorbed in a pedal passage of unusual difficulty. “How can he forget supper and everything!”

“That’s all for this time, Hale,” he called. “We’ll go home now.”

Hale was otherwise minded. She came out of her stuffy little pocket of a pump-room with her courage screwed up to ask what had been brewing in her mind for a long time. She was flushed and breathless, which made Forest feel condemned.

“I ought not to keep you so long,” he said,

contritely, "but I get interested and forget about you."

"That's all right," panted Hale. "The more time the more money, but I wish you would do something for me. When you have been playing one thing over and over for a hundred times or so, I go home with my head full of it, and whatever I try to do in the evening has to go to the tune of tum-diddle-dum-diddle-du-du-la-du, or whatever the old thing said last. I wish you'd play one glorious smash-banging march or anthem, or something, after your practising is done, just to get the jimmy-wiggles out of my ears. You needn't pay for the time it takes, if you'll only do it."

How Forest laughed at her puckered distress.

"You poor youngster!" he said, sympathetically, "I should say I will. Why haven't you asked me before?"

"I didn't have the courage. If you hadn't played that awful bass thing exactly fifty times, I might not have dared yet," she confessed.

After that, they never stopped work without a thrilling “smash-banger” to which Hale could look forward through the tedious hours of pumping.

Meantime, quite unknown to herself, a little plan was under discussion that was to throw a new light on her financial troubles.

CHAPTER XX

A MODERN MOTHER GOOSE

ONE afternoon in January, Hale came racing up the hill from school and burst in upon Grandmother's quiet meditations between the dark and the daylight. She threw her bag down on the couch and danced a wild fandango around the center table. Her cheeks were like roses, her eyes glowing with happiness, which made Grandmother's face light up with pleasure to see.

"Oh, Grandmother darling," she gasped at last, dropping to the floor where she could snuggle close to the dear lady's knee; "what do you suppose has happened to me! Something gorgeous! You'd never guess!"

"You have succeeded in learning how to do square root," guessed Grandmother, with a twinkle.

Hale settled back and gave her Grandmother a pleading look of offended dignity.

“Please don’t tease me now,” she begged. “There’s no hope of such a thing as that,—ever. This is something I shall love to do. Listen! Mr. Stickney called me up to the office to-day and asked me if I would be willing to help him try an experiment. He is one of the library trustees and he has a scheme for getting a group of children, little ones, he means, first-graders and second, to come to the library Saturday mornings for story-telling. Now do you see? He wants *me* to tell the stories.”

“Do you think you can do it well enough to keep little children quiet and interested?”

“Do it! I know I can. He took me down to the first-grade room and let me tell the story of the hare and the tortoise, to try me out. Little lady Grandmother, it was grand! Those babies listened to every word and when the bunny went to sleep to wait for the tortoise to catch up, the darlings did exactly what I did, like this,” explained Hale, tucking her clasped hands under her left ear and tipping her head over against them with her eyes shut.

“Mr. Stickney thinks I can do it nicely; anyway, he wants me to try. I shall begin Saturday morning with two groups, the first at nine o'clock for half an hour, and the second at quarter of ten for half an hour. Won't it be great!”

“It sounds very delightful,” agreed Grandmother.

“Still I haven't told you one of the nicest things about it,” Hale went on; “I am to be paid for it, one dollar a Saturday. If I can do it well and the children care to come they will continue it for fifteen weeks. Think of it, fifteen dollars! That will be a good lift on the books, won't it?”

“Splendid!”

“But listen, Grandmother! I've thought of the nicest plan. Don't you think it would be grand if I were to be dressed like Mother Goose while telling the stories?”

“Yes, I think it would,” said Grandmother with a quick little breath, as if she had just thought of something.

“Well?” prompted Hale. “What is it?”

“Little mind-reader!” laughed Grand-

mother, pinching her cheek. "I thought of a certain old camphor-chest up in the attic that may possibly have such a costume as you want. I am sure I saw one when I looked that chest over for the Christmas costumes."

"Could—"

"Yes, we'll go right this minute and get it."

It is the finest thing in the world to have a grandmother who can sympathize. Hale knew certain people, not a hundred miles away, who would have made you wait till next day, and would then have gone alone to the wonderful chest to find the dress.

When the costume was found it proved to be the very thing Hale wanted, and with a few simple alterations could be made to fit her suitably.

"I shall make out my list of stories now and practise every day so I shall have them all fresh and ready," she announced with an air of importance.

"Where will you find stories enough to last all those weeks?" asked Grandmother, doubtfully.

"I have a lot in my head right now," Hale

told her. "Mother and Miss Dwight have told me hundreds and I can remember lots of them word for word. Then Miss Colburn will give me books to learn others and I shall study them till I can tell them. Oh, say! Wouldn't Delia know some Irish stories, some that aren't in books? I'm going to ask her."

Aunt Alice, when informed of this intention, shook her head in caution.

"All very well," she said, "if you can do it without interfering with Delia's work."

"I will be sure of that," promised Hale.

"And you are not to neglect your music for this new fad."

"No, Aunt Alice."

Hale was blithe enough to promise anything and to shed any amount of cold water that might be thrown on the plan.

That very night, after supper, she followed Delia into the kitchen.

"Delia, I'm going to help with the dishes, for I want you to get through early," she announced.

"Well, did I ever!" ejaculated Delia.

“Whatever could it matter to you when I get through the work?”

“I want you to teach me something,” said Hale.

“Listen to the girl! What do I know that you’d be wantin’ to learn?”

“I’ll tell you when the work is all done, so you surely won’t be neglecting anything Aunt Alice has told you to do.”

“Whatever—” was as far as Delia could get in her amazement.

“Now then,” began Hale, when the kitchen was tidy, and the dish-towels rinsed, and the grapefruit prepared for breakfast, and the bread set to rise, and the lima beans put soaking for to-morrow’s dinner, and the kindlings laid ready for the morning fire; “I want you to tell me an Irish story; something that was told you when you were a little bit of a girl.”

“Whatever!” gasped Delia, dropping into a chair and regarding Hale with a frightened stare.

“Yes, I mean it,” laughed Hale. “You can go on with your crochet-work while you

tell me; but first I'll tell you what I want it for."

Delia had never in her life heard of any one being paid to tell stories, except as the comfortable peasants in her old country might now and then drop a penny into the hat of a poor old beggar who told a tale to earn a bite of bread.

When Hale finally succeeded in making Delia believe that she was in earnest, she still had the difficult task of persuading her that the children would be interested in Irish tales. Delia laughed the idea to scorn, though she was all the while casting about in her mind for a story to tell, while the flash of her crochet-hook was keen and rapid among her stitches.

"I might tell the story of the Little Rid Hin," she suggested.

Though Hale had often enough heard the story of the Little Red Hen, her quick ear caught the new pronunciation and she wondered if by listening carefully she might learn the trick of i for e, and many another with which Delia's words were flavored.

“All right,” she agreed, “tell that.”

That was only the beginning. Delia resurrected, from time to time, a great many stories she hadn't thought of for years; and enjoyed the telling of them, too. Hale caught the knack of the brogue remarkably well.

Aunt Alice thought it was all nonsense to try to entertain children with common servant-girl stories unless they were smoothed up and turned into better English; but Hale pinned her faith on the charm of the stories just as they were, and was delighted to hear the first-graders laugh over the funny words and the funny faces she put with them.

The story-hours were Hale's happiest hours. There was always some older person present to be sure of the discipline. Mr. Stickney was constantly dropping in on one excuse or another and there were sometimes other visitors, though Hale paid little attention to their coming and going. The children had her attention and she had theirs.

“And the wolf said, ‘Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in!’ ” she told them for the dozenth time, and immediately

all the youngsters opened their big round eyes and huffed and puffed with all their might.

"They want the same story over nearly every week, and I think they like it all the better because I let them do the things with me," she told Grandmother.

Altogether the story hours were a great success, and Hale felt very glad to be satisfying Mr. Stickney's expectations. More than that, she was very happy to be paying a dollar a week on the debt to Aunt Alice for the books.

The answer from her father in regard to their money matters was suggestive rather than definite. He had said, "We are not exactly paupers, though our ready money is scarce; our prospects are fairly good, but just now we mustn't indulge in luxuries."

Hale was glad she had been prevented from asking him for the book money. Thirty-eight dollars! What would he have thought? Certainly thirty-eight dollars looked bigger to Hale than it ever had before she tried to earn it.

So by degrees the story-telling money

added to the organ-pumping money completed the payments, and Hale felt rather proud than otherwise of her smart row of books. It was always a proud moment when she could use their contents to piece out school or family discussions of historical events.

It was after they were paid for that she told the story of their purchase to her father in a letter which contained another piece of information which interested him even more. But of that later.

CHAPTER XXI

HALE'S BLIZZARD

IT is a popular conundrum, never fully answered, as to which season of the year is the most enjoyable.

To Hale, hitherto, the snowy season had meant that she less often could venture out for her quiet walks with Miss Dwight. She never had cared much, because the inside of the house was much more attractive with its warmth and quiet amusements. She could see about all of winter that she wanted to see through the windows. Her first winter in Hawthorne was to be a new kind of winter.

She could not romp through the bright sharp days of autumn without learning to love the cool freshness of the big outdoors. As winter approached and Roy began to sniff the air for snow and foretell the wonderful times they could have, Hale found herself looking eagerly forward to the sports he described.

When the snow and ice made the new sports possible, she was one of their most enthusiastic devotees.

The Hawthorne young people made much of winter sports. They were not content that each family should coast in the seclusion of its own back yard. That was merely sliding down hill. Every one must get together, round up all the double-runners in the town, (they knew who had them) and make a real party of coasting.

After school till dark, on Saturdays every hour they could beg or steal from home duties, and on moonlight nights, the hill was the place to look for any desired person, if the snow was deep and well-packed. If the snow was poor and the ice was good, the population swung to the pond.

Hale knew nothing about skating, but she found a pair of skates among her Christmas presents and became Roy's pupil as soon as the pond was considered safe. Such lessons and such laughing! Such lameness and such determined effort in spite of it!

It was all very well when Roy on one side

end of half an hour she telephoned to the library. Hale was not there. Calling Marion Shedd and Edith Hatch and Beatrice Philips proved equally futile; none of them had heard the missing girl say a word about her plans.

The hopelessness of locating a lost person without the help of a town crier was baffling to Miss Merrill. If only one knew which way to turn. Then a clue came by telephone from Marion Shedd. She had been casting about for some one who knew about Hale, and had learned from one of the mountain children that Hale had ridden on the school pung up to Mrs. Bartlett's.

"Such a night to take that notion into her head," complained Miss Merrill, as she hung up the receiver. She was annoyed. A scrutiny of the thickening storm brought her anxiety to the fore and she took counsel with her mother.

"I think I shall send Michael out to meet her," she said. "It is getting thicker and rougher momentarily. Of course, Mrs. Bartlett will send the child home at once, but she

may get exhausted and be glad of Michael's assistance."

Michael was alarmed to learn that Hale was out in the storm. He hastily bundled himself into his coat and scarf while Delia warmed his mittens and cautioned him to pull his ear-muffs well about his ears. Miss Merrill loaned him her electric flashlight, and he set out on his rough trip.

He well knew the road to the mountain. It was the same over which he had drawn Mrs. Merrill's cord-wood in the fall. Mrs. Bartlett's house he had often seen up the hill a few hundred yards above the gateway at which he had turned in to reach the woodlot. His thoughts far outran his progress through the snow. He pictured Hale's little figure buffeted by the sixty-mile gale which made him turn his back ever and anon to catch his breath. As he made his way slowly through the village, he inquired of every foot passenger he met if they had seen aught of little Miss Merrill.

Meantime, Hale had ridden merrily off with

the school-team children and surprised Mrs. Bartlett with a call. She was inclined to joke about the weather and to laugh at Mrs. Bartlett's suggestion that she ought to stay hardly a minute.

"Aren't you glad to see me?" asked Hale, laughing.

"Yes, I'm always glad to see you; but I know what it means when the wind comes swooping over the shoulder of the mountain this way. I'm going to give you a cup of hot chocolate and then you must go. Your Grandmother will be anxious about you in such a storm."

Hale drank her chocolate thoughtfully, and considered the rushing drive of the snow. She began to think she had been a little unwise. Still, she would be home before dark and there could be no harm coming from it.

She was surprised to find, upon setting out, how the character of the storm had changed. The wind, as Auntie Bartlett had said, was swooping roughly over a shoulder of the mountain. It seemed to seize her by the shoulders and push her forward violently.

With a clear course, Hale would have run before the wind and let it push her, but at present the accumulation of heavy snow made such a mode of progress impossible. She picked herself up from a tumble and bent all her energy to keeping her head and feet properly balanced.

The thickness of the storm shut out the surrounding landscape and confused her in her directions. The beaten track was soon velvety smooth with its new coat of snow, making her uncertain whether she was still in the road. Not a sound, not an object, nothing but a world of rushing flakes. She began to be a little frightened. What if one were to stand still and be covered with flakes, buried quite out of sight! It seemed quite possible in the present conditions.

She came up suddenly against a set of pasture-bars and clung to them in relief, till she recognized that she must have left the road and knew not where she was. After that her confusion increased. She blundered on a few steps and stopped to consider. She was sure they had been steps in a wrong direction.

A panic of apprehension seized her. She started again in a slightly different direction and went on doggedly, only to stumble over the protruding roots of a tree and go down on all-fours.

Rising, she walked around the tree and tried to make it out. Although it was now nearly dark, she felt almost sure this was the red oak that stood in the open pasture near the turn of the road to Hawthorne. How had she come so far off the road! She stood with her back against the trunk and tried to think calmly of her difficulties.

If this was the red oak, then Hawthorne lay over there, and the road off here to the left. When she had a little more breath she would try again. If only some sound of humans could reassure her a bit! She hallooed as loudly as she could. The ocean of flakes in which she moved absorbed the sound, it seemed.

Moving blindly in what she hoped was the right direction, she found a cold sort of comfort in repeating the useless calls. It helped keep her blood warm to shout and then feel



SHE FELT ALMOST SURE THIS WAS THE RED OAK NEAR THE TURN OF
THE ROAD.—*Page 258.*

angry at the way the sound was muffled in the storm. Her breath was too precious to waste, she decided, as she struggled on; yet next moment she was aware that she had called again.

It surprised her that she was not cold. She was certain she would not freeze even if she stayed out all night. Perhaps she could find a place somewhere to sit down and rest, for certainly she was very tired. The snow might bury her quite out of sight, but it would be warm and soft and restful. Almost anything would be better than dragging her steps through this entanglement of snow and confused directions.

She stumbled and fell, and decided it wasn't worth while to get up, since darkness had completely blotted out all hope of finding her way.

How long she sat huddled there she never knew. She was beginning to feel a bit drowsy when she was rudely awakened by a looming object which kicked her roughly and fell sprawling across her.

"Tarnation!" gasped a voice, and Hale

murmured, "Excuse me," and lapsed into drowsiness as if the slight interruption was of no account.

The prostrate figure picked itself up and rescued a shot-gun and a rabbit which had sunk into the snow. Groping then to discover the obstacle which had tripped him, he struck his free hand vigorously against Hale's cheek. The shock of the impact roused her. She straightened up and found herself face to face with Frank Parsons.

"What in all creation are you doing here?" he asked, not unkindly.

"I lost my way," said Hale, drearily. "I don't even know where here is."

"Then it's well you sat down in the middle of the road, or I'd never have known you was 'round."

"Do you know your way home?" asked Hale hopefully.

"Nothing surer!" boasted Frank. "I can keep in the middle of the road from here to the village with my eyes shut. Come on. It ain't more 'n a mile now."

They plodded slowly along, Frank walking

ahead with his rabbit and gun, Hale following wearily at his heels. They attempted no conversation; sometimes they halted for breath; and presently they saw the glow of Michael's flashlight.

As they waited for him to come up, Frank found courage to say what had been in his mind all along.

"I'm not sellin' cigarettes to the boys any more," he faltered; "not since that day."

"Oh," said Hale, greatly embarrassed.

"No, nor I don't ask any of 'em to smoke, either."

"Oh." Hale was annoyed that she could think of no other answer.

"I'm not an angel yet," went on Frank, a little hurriedly; "I use 'em myself still; but I guess I ain't quite so mean as I was."

Michael came up to them, and Hale attempted no answer.

"Well, praise the Lord, I've found ye!" ejaculated the breathless Michael. "It's glad I am to be turnin' me back on this howlin' gale."

Michael took up his position in the rear of

the line and they moved on slowly toward the village. At the post-office Frank left them, after Michael had assured him that he would not need further piloting. They called for the Merrill mail and Michael gave the one letter to Hale.

"It's for Miss Alice," he said.

Hale glanced at it and murmured in surprise,

"It's from Miss Dwight."

"What's that?" asked Michael.

"Nothing, only this letter surprised me," said Hale.

"Yes, it's a surprisin' big handwritin'. I always mind that handwritin' and wonder if it's a man or a woman."

"Why! has Aunt Alice had others like this?"

"Oh, yes, a matter of three or four I've took her."

Hale was puzzled, but she said no more.

Needless to say, the hour since Michael's departure was a period of unrest and anxiety for Grandmother, Aunt Alice, and Delia. They tried to keep busy and cheerful, but

found it extremely difficult. Delia kept coming in to inquire if they thought this or that might have happened to Hale, till Miss Merrill had to be severe with her.

“Don’t talk as if Hale were dead, Delia! It’s hard for us all to wait, but we’ll have to do it. Don’t make it any harder. Keep the supper hot and if she isn’t here by half-past six, we’ll come and eat.”

Delia retired to her kitchen in disgust.

“Eat, is it!” she mumbled; “it’s not a mouthful I’ll eat till Hale and me man are safe housed again—not if it’s midnight first.”

She did not venture into the sitting-room again, but sat brooding by the kitchen range and shuddering when spiteful blasts of wind shook the blinds and roared in the chimney. Presently she heard Michael stamping off snow in the woodshed and, with a heartfelt “Praise the Lord!” she hastened to open the door.

In the sitting-room, Grandmother helped Hale remove her outside wraps while Aunt Alice went up-stairs to prepare a hot tub as a

precaution against chill. In half an hour, Hale was re-clothed and hungrily devouring a hot oyster-stew in the friendly warmth of Grandmother's familiar dining-room.

She was a good deal awed by her experience, but otherwise unhurt, and when they had gathered about the open fire Grandmother let her tell about her wandering in the snow and her sensations and impressions.

Not till she was saying "Good night" did she remember the letter.

"There was a letter for you, Aunt Alice; it's in my coat pocket. I'll get it."

Miss Merrill flushed slightly as she received the envelope with its dashing superscription, but she made no comment. Hale lingered a moment half-supposing that Aunt Alice would say something about the letter. Then, conscious that she was staring rudely at it, she offered to explain.

"I thought it looked like Miss Dwight's writing," she said.

"It is," said Aunt Alice, as if that were the end of the matter. "Run along to bed."

“How queer!” was the only conclusion Hale could arrive at, after thinking the matter over and over till she was too sleepy to think any more.

CHAPTER XXII

BETWEEN SEASONS

“‘**T**IS gay but not gaudy, as the monkey said when he painted his tail sky-blue,” remarked Michael O’Shea, standing back to make a critical survey of a stiff cardboard on which he had just finished painting alternate black and white concentric rings.

“Oh, thank you, Michael, that looks fine,” said Hale from her perch on the table.

They were out in the wash-room, to which Aunt Alice had exiled forever all pasting and painting of theatrical properties following an accident to the sitting-room rug; not a very bad accident, thanks to Hale’s quick rescue of the paste-bowl as it careened and threatened a general destruction to table and carpet. As it proved, the table was quickly wiped off and the spot on the rug was of

the size of a silver dollar, but it might easily have been worse, and Aunt Alice preferred rather to be safe than sorry.

“Where’ll I put the striped critter?” asked Michael.

“Anywhere so it will dry without getting rubbed. The girls will think that’s just lovely, Michael. We could hardly get along in the Dramatic Club without you; and now that Mr. Stickney has found out about it and wants us to act our play for the school, I am particularly anxious to have things right.”

“Shur-r-r!” sympathized Michael, hunting about for a safe place for the work of his hands to rest.

“Oh, and, Michael,” pursued Hale, “do you think you could fix a standard for that to lean on, a kind of easel or something to rest it on?”

“What and all do ye think I am?” demanded Michael, holding the board at arm’s length to get the idea. “An easel, is it? Shure, I no sooner fight me way t’rough one job but ye give me another t’ree times as hard!

“ ‘Such a gettin’ up stairs I never did see,
Get up one and fall back t’ree.’ ”

“You are so funny, Michael,” gasped Hale, laughing at his antics, for Michael was pretending to trip over his own feet as he sung the couplet in a voice as awkward and lumbering as his figure.

“Yourself is the funny one,” retorted Michael, all smiles. “Explain to me now, what is a easel? It sounds more hard than easy.”

Hale jumped off the table, and by rapid gestures and the aid of a snub-nosed pencil showed Michael what she wanted. He stood watching her till the idea struck home, when he said, “I get ye,” and struck into another of his favorite vocal selections,

“ ‘A chicken, a chucken, a craney crow
Went to the well to wash his toe,’ ”

breaking off to sigh in mock dejection and declare that “the way of the transgressor is hard.”

They both understood, and so did Delia, who could hear it all in the kitchen, that

Michael was having the best of good times. To fly here and there at Hale's beck and call, to fetch and carry for the Dramatic Club made him happier than a king. "The Little Lady" he called Hale in his talk with Delia, and the more Hale ordered him about, the more did his peasant soul delight in serving her.

Since the Dramatic Club had resumed its interrupted activities, Michael had been constantly in demand, as popular, he flattered himself, as the Prince of Wales.

How he knew so much about making things was the mystery and delight of all the members of the Club. They had only to show him a picture of a spear or lance or shield or long-bow, and Michael's ready knife was sure to fashion it for them. He enjoyed the work; but quite as much he enjoyed the chorus of delight and wonder that his talents called forth.

As Hale had intimated, the activities of the Club had become known to Mr. Stickney and through his adaptation had taken on an increased importance. If such a piece of work

was in progress, why not let the school have the benefit? The Club was willing enough, so the question was settled.

The idea grew even larger in Mr. Stickney's busy mind. After a turn over or two, it came to this point: why not let the village have the benefit? Nobody who remembered the Christmas pageant could offer any objection to that.

On second thought, Mr. Stickney decided to wait till the close of the school year when weather conditions would permit an outdoor performance.

With this end in view, he shaped his course and influenced the Club to re-cast the parts to include the high-school pupils, to let boys play all the male parts, and to let the action center around the theme of "An Old English Fête Day," rather than attempting to portray the complicated tale of "Ivanhoe."

This manipulation of the original plan was so skillfully managed that no one took offense, except Beatrice Philips, whose principal method of keeping herself in the public eye was by airing a grievance every so often.

Indeed, the girls of the Dramatic Club had been aware of a certain top-heaviness in their undertaking and were only too glad to accept a guiding and steadying hand.

As the preparations and rehearsals progressed, Michael's dexterity became known to them, and he was entrusted with more and more of the work. Hale rejoiced that Michael had happened to belong to her family, since it gave her the right to dabble in and oversee the property accumulation. Of course, he teased her about trying to "boss the job," but she boldly confessed that she intended to boss as much as she pleased.

She did not, however, let him know that she was all the time storing up his antics and nonsense jingles to repeat to the girls and set them off in gales of laughter.

Nor did she permit the heavy responsibilities of the Dramatic Club to interfere with her enjoyment of life out of doors. If Roy said, "Come on out!" she had no scruples about leaving Michael to do his work alone, or even to finish her own. It must be confessed that Roy's calls came frequently; for

the backbone of winter was broken and there were great changes in progress from week to week.

Hale had never seen the spring come in the country. Once she had motored out with her father in early May and had been surprised to find grass so green and the apple-blossoms bursting, when back in the city one could hardly realize that winter was gone. Because it burst upon her so suddenly that day she had unconsciously made up her mind that it would always come so. She was this spring to learn her mistake.

In March, she and Roy had tramped along the snowy road one afternoon when Roy suddenly seized her arm and pointed to a swampy place below the embankment.

“Skunk-cabbage!” he announced.

Hale acknowledged the introduction and would have made a closer examination of this new acquaintance, but Roy held her back.

“Better let it alone,” he cautioned. “It’s kind of smelly. The only use I know for skunk-cabbage is to let a fellow know that spring is coming.”

“Spring?” questioned Hale.

“Sure thing! That’s the first sign, and after a while there will be others. You’ll see. Look at the sky now. It isn’t the same color blue it has been all winter.”

“How is it different?” asked Hale, who could see no great change.

“Oh, I don’t know, except it’s bluer somehow, and warmer. Next month we’ll be getting pussy willows and the snow-water will swell all the brooks and ditches. Then the mud will be deep and disagreeable in the roads, but it won’t last forever.”

“Do you like spring?” asked Hale.

“Gee, yes! You know what we’ll do? We’ll go down by the river and get pollywogs and put ’em in a glass jar and watch ’em grow.”

“What are pollywogs?”

Roy looked at her in blank amazement.

“For the love of Pete!” he said inelegantly, “don’t you know pollywogs!”

“No, Mr. Know-it-all, I don’t. Would you be so condescending as to tell me?” Hale pretended to be very meek.

"Why! they're young frogs, only they don't have any legs and they don't look a bit like frogs. They have tails and go steering around through the water lickety-larrup. I never get tired of watching them."

"I suppose I have a lot to learn," said Hale, skipping happily at the thought. "The country is just like a big book, with something new on every page."

"You bet it is!" agreed her cousin. "There's the trees, and the wild flowers, and the birds, no end of interesting things. I know just where to put my hand on a bunch of arbutus when the time comes. Nobody else knows this place, 'cause I never told."

"You'll tell me, won't you, Roy?" coaxed Hale.

"May be I will, if you'll promise, cross your throat, you will never tell."

"No, I won't tell."

"Arbutus is hard to find 'cause everybody yanks it up by the roots and thins it out too much. So when you find a patch, you want to pick it carefully and keep still about it, so it will be there next year."

Hale learned a good deal about the coming of spring in the next two months. She was often deceived into thinking it had really arrived; only to be surprised and annoyed to wake up and find the ground covered with snow.

“One certainly has to learn patience,” she decided. “I’m not going to expect it any more till the first of June. That will be late enough, won’t it, Grandmother?”

“Yes, plenty,” said Grandmother, smiling. “I think I can promise you two or three things before that. Unless something quite unusual happens, you’ll see apple-blossoms the second week in May, and I’m reasonably sure that the lemon-lilies and the fleur-de-lis will be out for Memorial Day. I can go a step farther and promise you that within a fortnight the elms will be in blossom, snow or no snow.”

“How do you feel so sure?” asked Hale.

“Because my old eyes are well versed in the signs, and to-day as I looked off to the west I saw that the elms have a full and fringe-y appearance that they haven’t had all

winter. It means just one thing,—that spring is very near in spite of snow.”

So from the open book of the world Hale learned to read the story of nature in its different forms, and to find in each phase a throng of interesting things to occupy her time and thoughts.

It was May almost before she knew it.

CHAPTER XXIII

BOBBY HALE

“DEAR FATHER:

“I have been waiting, and working, many long weeks to tell you about my books. At first the very thought of them was hateful, but I have gradually become reconciled to them; and now that they are paid for I am really proud of them, and a little proud of myself, but I wouldn't say that to any one but you.

“A book agent, by her enticing words, and partly by a picture of Joan of Arc, beguiled me into the purchase. I thoughtlessly supposed you would pay for them, but Aunt Alice nipped that fond hope in the bud and said I must pay for my own folly. So I have done it, at last, with my Christmas money and my story-telling money and my organ-pumping money. Hurrah! Daddy dear, don't say I'm not a worker!

“Now I have a story to tell you and a question to ask, though I don't want to be rude and you once refused to answer the question. I'll tell you the story first.

“Before the pageant we went to a little house up near the mountain to get a lady to do some work for the costumes. She is

a lonely lady and she wanted us to come again sometime. I have been to see her several times since Christmas. One day last week Roy and I were up near her house hunting arbutus and I went in to see her.

"She was making a scrap-book out of pictures she had saved, and wanted me to look at the ones she had already finished.

"How romantic that such trifling incidents often mean so much! The book she called her 'famous people' has authors and artists and so forth pasted in.

"Well, Daddy dear, I'll not keep you waiting for the climax any longer. One of the pictures was marked 'Miss Roberta Hale, whose favorite pseudonym of "Little Bobby Hale" is dear to the theater lovers of two hemispheres.'

"Of course you know the picture. I knew it at once and could almost hear her speak. How many questions came thronging into my mind all in a minute! I must have seemed quite dazed to Auntie Bartlett, for I wouldn't look at anything else for minutes and minutes. Then I found she had a lot more Bobby Hale pictures, dozens of them in different rôles and costumes, so I just feasted on them. Aren't they darling! I don't wonder every one loved her. And to think she belonged to us out of all the world. What an honor!

"The question I want to ask—oh, first I must make a confession. I asked Grandmother once if your quarrel with Aunt Alice was about Mother and she said it was, so

that much I know. What I'd like to ask is, will you tell me now whether the quarrel was because Mother was an actress? I should like to tell Aunt Alice that I have seen my mother's pictures and see what she would say; but I shall wait till I hear from you. Do answer soon.

"It is spring here now and Michael is working every day in the garden. I dig and delve in a plot of my own, though Michael pretends I don't do anything right.

"I made a poem the other day. Would you like to see it?

"The little puss willows are shedding their fur,
The tadpoles are raising some legs;
While out in the apple-tree near the back door
The robin has laid her blue eggs.

"I never knew what tadpoles were till this spring. Roy thought I was frightfully ignorant. I suppose I was.

"I'm glad you don't have to go down into Mexico, after all. It would take too long. As it is, I can hardly wait for you to get back. I count off the weeks on my calendar and have put a line all round the first week in June to commemorate it in advance. When you tell me the day I shall enclose that by itself. It will be a red letter day. I know! I'll enclose it in red ink.

"Oceans of love,

"HALE."

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The answer to this, which came two weeks later said among other things, "Aunt Alice will tell you whatever you wish to know about your mother." There was a P. S. which said "You may red-ink the 6th of June."

CHAPTER XXIV

AUNT ALICE EXPLAINS

THE same mail which brought Hale's letter from her father brought one for Aunt Alice in the same handwriting. Hale received hers with a guilty flush and hurried up-stairs to read it alone, as if Aunt Alice could know in handling it that it concerned herself.

Miss Merrill placed her mother's letters on the table to await her return from an afternoon nap, and sat down to open her own. A letter from her brother just at this time was unusual, since their only correspondence had to do with the monthly check he sent for Hale, and that was not due for two weeks.

Miss Merrill was, however, not a person to speculate over the outside of a letter. She opened it briskly and very shortly learned its contents.

"DEAR ALICE:

"Hale has written me to inquire about her mother. She has seen a collection of pictures at somebody's house and wants to know how the fact that her mother was an actress should have made a quarrel between yourself and me.

"Wouldn't you better tell her how it was? I think you can do it better than I; it's rather a hard thing to explain on paper.

"Affectionately,

"MARCUS."

Miss Merrill read the letter twice before putting it away in the envelope. Then she tore it through and through and dropped it into the fire, watching it turn to ashes.

"It seems queer now that there should have been a quarrel," she mused. "I declare I'm ashamed to own to the child how headstrong and foolish I was."

Miss Merrill took up her sewing and bent her head painstakingly over the stitches. One might infer that the needlework required her undivided attention, but one would be mistaken in so thinking. The proud spirit which had kept Miss Merrill stiff and unbending so long was bowing before a home-

thrust conviction that it was a contemptible thing.

Miss Merrill did not spare herself. She used very strong words in dealing with her pride, now that she was ready to face the truth. She was ashamed to think she had not forestalled her brother's letter and Hale's questions by an explanation. For months she had tried to find courage to do so, but her wretched pride had stood in her way.

Hale's discovery of a correspondence between her aunt and Miss Dwight could easily have led to the explanation, if she had seized the opportunity. Pride was the last obstacle in that long journey of nearly twenty years which had brought her at last to the point of being just to her brother.

Hale's part in the gradual transformation had been considerable. Indeed, until last September no iota of relenting had suggested itself as possible. At this moment, the feeling that she had made a great sacrifice of time and energy to take the burden of Hale's care upon herself was remembered with surprise. She was ready to admit that the home

was happier and life more interesting than before Hale's coming, and certainly the child had been very little care.

Yet here she sat, letting the minutes slip by and doing nothing to clear the situation.

She rose and went resolutely to the door.

"Hale," she called.

"Yes, Aunt Alice."

"Have you read your letter?"

"Yes, Aunt Alice."

"If you've nothing special to do, bring your knitting and come down here."

"Yes, Aunt Alice."

There was no doubt in Hale's mind that the interview was to be what she had wished so long. She sat down by the fire and took her work in hand, trembling with eagerness.

"Your father writes me that you have seen some pictures of your mother."

"Yes, Aunt Alice."

"What were they?"

"Many different ones, in all the parts she played."

"Did you know before that your mother was an actress?"

“No, Aunt Alice, I never asked her what she was.”

“That is rather strange.”

“It was,” admitted Hale, “but I had never thought of her as being anything besides my mother till the night you spoke of her here, as if she had been something wicked. Grandmother said then I might be proud of her.”

“Grandmother was right, Hale, and I was unwise and childish to speak of her that way. I think that was the beginning of my recovery from the delusion that your father had been imposed upon. I will not try to shield or excuse myself and yet I hope you will think as well of me as you can under the circumstances, for I was honest in my conviction.

“Your father took up his writing habit very early in life. He was, in fact, not out of high school when he began to burn with the desire to be an author. His going to college was a matter of some difficulty, because my father was no longer with us, but we made what sacrifices we had to and he started in. Fortunately, he was able to help

himself a little all along by journalistic work. At the beginning of his senior year he was assured of sufficient income to board at the college. Up to that time, he had lived at home.

“We did not hear from him very regularly, but we didn’t worry because we knew he was busy. In fact, Mother told him that as long as she could take the *Scribe* and read what he wrote from week to week she would know he was all right.

“Late one afternoon we received by mail a paper from our lawyer, something about an obscure piece of property belonging to your grandfather’s estate, which must be signed that very day by all the heirs, to prevent the lapsing of a claim. There seemed no other way but for all of us here at home to sign it and then that I should take the paper to the city and get Marcus to sign it. I would have to spend the night in town and could deliver the paper to the lawyer next day.

“I had to go on the milk-train from here, and it was nearly nine o’clock when I reached

my brother's room, only to find that he was not there. His door was not locked, so I went in and lighted the gas to look about and see if I could get a clue to his whereabouts. I had never seen his college room before, and I must confess I was eager to see how it was kept.

“You must remember, Hale, that young ladies in my day were brought up with a holy horror of the stage and dancing and cards. These were the three deadly sins for a young woman to avoid. With smoking and horse-racing added, they were likewise the curse of a young man if they touched him.

“Think then, how I must have felt to observe that my brother's room was ornamented with photographs of actresses. I did not then notice that it was all one actress, the costumes and poses were so varied. The object of my visit was for the time forgotten as I stood there, realizing that my brother had been left to his own devices and allowed to be scorched by the fire of this great evil. How trustingly we had left him to the wicked wiles of the great city!

"I don't know how long I had been standing there when a young man came in, apologized for intruding, and said he expected to find a note telling him where to meet Marcus. The note was there, asking him to meet my brother at Bobby's hotel for a little celebration. I explained who I was and we went together.

"The celebration was a lobster supper in honor of the engagement of my brother to the actress whose pictures adorned his room. I am ashamed of it now, but I rejoiced at the time, that I broke up the party. Marcus was frank enough about it (I called it boldness at the time), told me that little Bobby Hale was to be his wife, and invited me to join the party. Your mother (it was the only time I ever saw her alive) would have been very cordial, but I was—myself, I guess. I was disturbed beyond the reach of common sense. I felt it was my duty to drag my brother back from the pit.

"He took me back to his room and tried to reason with me. He showed me all her pictures and urged me to read her sweet

character in her face; but I would not. I could not see anything but a wicked adventuress in any actress whatsoever. I was, of course, at the mercy of my prejudices.

“It was close to twelve o’clock before I remembered the paper I had brought to be signed. Marcus routed a classmate out of bed to witness his signature. Then I went to bed in my brother’s room while he camped on the couch in his study.

“I need not drag you through the whole quarrel. Marcus was a gentleman, I am glad to tell you; more considerate and patient with me than I with him, I fear. He came home with me next morning and had a talk with Mother. I believe he convinced her that the lady of his choice was in every way worthy of the family name and honor; but Mother begged him to wait a while, hoping I would see the matter in a happier light before he actually brought her into the family.

“Before he returned to college we had another session, which I forced upon him in the firm intention of wringing a promise from

him that he would not marry an actress. He would not promise. He was as coolly, politely determined not to relinquish her as I was hotly and scathingly determined he should. I hope, Hale, you will find some profit in this confession, for it gives me neither pride nor pleasure to make it.

“I never saw my brother again till last September when I saw you for the first time. It was perhaps a year after my visit to the college that we had a short note from him. Little Bobby Hale had fallen from a faulty staging while acting her part, had injured her back and could probably never walk again. She had no family living, and her savings would soon be absorbed by hospital expenses. Marcus had married her that day and was writing to let us know.

“Again I was blind to his splendid motive. I judged that the actress had trapped him to get herself taken care of. Of your father's home life and of you, when you came some five years later, I chose to know nothing. When your mother died, I brought you here solely from a sense of duty, because I

hoped to counteract the bad influence of such a mother as I supposed you had had.

“That is why I suspected you so persistently. When your reading caused the town to talk, I was filled with alarm. I expected you to be a bold, coarse child. That evening when you came in with your head bruised and refused so steadily and politely to tell what had happened, you were your father right over again, and I felt ashamed and mean. I made up my mind to find out all I could about your mother and your bringing up. I have been corresponding with Miss Dwight, as you know; and I want to say once and for all that you have every reason to be proud of your mother and ashamed of your Aunt Alice.”

There was a tremor in her voice that went straight to Hale's heart.

“Don't feel bad about it, Aunt Alice,” she begged, springing up to embrace her.

Aunt Alice put her work aside and drew Hale into her lap. For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Words are useless when tears speak so eloquently.

"Why! I really love her," Hale was thinking in surprise. "I didn't suppose I ever could. Oh, I am glad, so glad!"

She put all the fervor of her new emotion into the clasp of her arms, and Aunt Alice returned it with grateful understanding. Then it was Hale who wept and had to be comforted.

"I have been hateful in my thoughts of you, Aunt Alice. I am so ashamed and sorry," she sobbed.

"Never mind, darling. There, there, you couldn't help it. I was not fit to be loved."

Then Hale had to control her tears and be a comforter in her turn.

So they talked and cried together till everything had been explained and adjusted. Altogether it was a rather showery process, but it ended as all clearing-up showers do, in blue sky and a clear sunset.

"Now let me go up-stairs and write to your father, Hale. I want to make him understand how ashamed I am and how glad I shall be to make amends, if such a thing is possible."

Hale also wrote a letter to her father in which she told in minute detail how sorry Aunt Alice was for the past, and begged him to forgive her.

Marcus Merrill, reading the two letters, smiled at Hale's jubilation over the discovery that "Aunt Alice is, after all, a person you can love." Then turning to his sister's letter, he read it through again.

"Certainly a new spirit for Alice to exhibit," he mused gravely. "I believe the child may be right."

CHAPTER XXV

THE GARDEN

NOW that the story-telling days were over, Hale had more playtime on Saturdays, for which she was very glad. Much as she loved to tell stories, she would have found it hard to be shut in the house on days like these.

Michael O'Shea was proving himself as clever with garden tools as with carpenter's. He could hardly wait for the ground to soften enough to get his spade into it. He had so many plans for laying out garden-plots and shrubbery that Grandmother laughingly accused him of lying awake nights to think up ways of tearing her garden to pieces and remodeling it to suit himself.

The outside of the house was entirely Grandmother's; that is, Aunt Alice claimed no right to say how the lawns and gardens should be managed. She would not even act

as go-between when Michael had suggestions to make; so it came to be a standing joke in the family that Michael should come every morning to ask if Mrs. Merrill would see him in the sitting-room or out on the porch.

Whenever the weather was mild Grandmother preferred the porch, since Michael had not changed his brand of tobacco.

“You’d not be steppin’ down to the garden to see what I’m plannin’, Mis’ Merrill?” he would ask in a coaxing tone.

“You’d better tell me here, I think, Michael. It’s a little damp, isn’t it?”

“Not enough to hurt a body,” he would reply, with his eyes still coaxing.

“Well, perhaps I will; if you’ll wait till I get my rubbers and a wrap.”

Michael would wait, certainly, if only she would come; and Grandmother, following his lead, would try to persuade herself that she went only to please Michael, when all the time she knew perfectly well that if Michael had a plan for the garden she couldn’t wait another day to hear what it was, however wet the paths might be. It was such a nov-

elty in Grandmother's recent years to find some one interested enough to suggest intelligently.

Michael could never forgive himself that he had not come in August to find his Delia.

"It's in August that all these things ought to be minded," he would say, disconsolately. "Them peonies don't belong there, one could see with half an eye, but it won't do to move them till next August."

"Where would you put them, Michael?"

"Along there by the walk," he would say, "in a hedge like, where they'll show themselves off. And the iris! It's all very well to have it bunched that way, if you don't care a whit for how it looks; but if you *do*, then f'why not spread it along by the bank there, where it will have a fair show?"

"That would be desirable, I know," Grandmother would agree. "Indeed, I tried to persuade Tom Cleary to do that last summer, but he made it appear that I was all wrong in my suggestion."

"Tom Cleary, is it?" Michael would say, "not him as drives for Snyder on the coal-

cart? Well then, I'm not surprised. Shure *he* hasn't sense enough to plant an acorn, say nothin' of layin' out a lady's garden."

"Tom thought he had a very great knowledge of such things," Grandmother would protest, secretly enjoying the "layin' out" of Tom Cleary which took place in one form or another every time the garden plans were discussed.

"Well, all I'd say is, if I could buy that fellow for what I think he's worth and sell him for what he thinks he's worth, I'd never have to scratch a poor man's head a'more."

So that question would end with a big good-natured laugh and a contemptuous "Tom Cleary, indeed!" and the conversation would turn to some more profitable phase of the subject, some plan which need not be deferred till August.

It was, "Will you like to have the asters planted here?" or, "If the larkspur's to go next the wall, will it do to put the snapdragons here in front, and about how far?" or, "Would you be consentin' to have the rose-bush moved to the opposite side of the

path to get it out from the shade of that hedge that gives it no show?"

Thus would Grandmother and Michael chat and plan till Aunt Alice, calling from a window, would let them know that it was half-past ten and time for Grandmother to come in, or she'd be all tired out.

Michael had a wonderful time in the garden. He sang in a blundering bass like a big bumble-bee, all sound and no sense. Delia, whose musical ability was quite the pride of them both, used to call from her pantry window for him to hush and not scare the neighbors. Nothing daunted, he would lay back his head and roar with laughter, and ask her if she were not pleased with his tune.

"There's no tune to it, you rogue!" she would charge, "and it fair makes me dizzy to hear such a rumble."

Not discouraged or offended, his broad face would beam with delight through its sweat and grime as he returned to his spading with a renewed volume of sound.

Spring fever affects people in different ways, but those who claim to feel listless and in need of a tonic are not, as a rule, the people who work in the sod.

Hale could hardly keep her feet on the ground. What with the orchard a-flutter with birds and apple-blossoms, and the brown earth cracking away from the sturdy green heads of daffodil, tulip, and narcissus that were pushing up in spite of Tom Cleary's gross ignorance, and the greenness of meadows and hillsides, and the blueness of the sky, and the warmth of the breeze from the south, she sometimes knew not which way to turn to express her coltish joy.

Certainly she sympathized heartily with Michael's unbridled rumble, if that was the best he could do. She worked with him whenever she had no pressing duties, in a small plot which she chose to call her own.

One Saturday, she and Michael finished transplanting the asters and found they had a dozen or so more than they needed. Hale asked if she might give them to Roy for his

garden. There being no objection to the plan, she put them in a basket and took them to him at once.

She found him on the back porch rigging a water-wheel for the brook.

"No use!" said Roy, resentfully. "I'd like the plants well enough, but they'll never live to grow up."

"Why not?"

For answer, Roy pointed out across the yard where Hale could see a flock of white hens, picturesquely dotting the grass and scratching under the shrubs.

"Shut up your chickens so they won't scratch," she suggested.

"My chickens!" snapped Roy, so cross it made Hale jump. "The blamed things don't belong to me. I'd cut their old heads off for a dare! Had a lot of pansies out there along the grape-trellis, and they scratched up every last one of 'em."

"Why doesn't Mrs. Foster keep them shut up?"

"You can search me!" scolded Roy. "Probably because she knows we'd like to

have her. She doesn't care about gardens and things, and she thinks nobody else does so long as her biddies lay plenty of eggs."

Hale seated herself on the step and silently watched Roy wiring two flanges together, though her mind was not on what he was doing. Presently she clapped her hands, and Roy jumped.

"'Scuse me!" laughed Hale. "I didn't mean to scare you, but I've thought of the biggest idea you ever knew! Wait a minute."

She went into the house, returning very shortly with something in her basket which she would not show Roy.

"Don't come," she said over her shoulder as she started down the path.

All Roy could see was that she swooped to the ground for a second, beside the syringa-bush; then she was again beside him on the step.

"The stage is set for the big idea!" she told him in excited glee. "Listen, Roy; you'll have to help act the scene. Will you do it?"

“Sure thing! What is it?”

“It’s the big idea. When I say—” She broke off suddenly as the door of the Foster house opened and the owner of the hens appeared. “The scene is about to begin. All you have to do is to say, ‘That’s good; we can use them.’ Do you understand?”

“That’s good; we can use them,” repeated Roy. “I guess I’m good for that much of a part. Is that all I say?”

“Yes, that’s all; only say it up good and loud so she—our audience—will hear.”

“Trust me!” promised Roy.

Hale stood up and shook herself. She stepped carelessly down to the walk and began a tour of inspection of the strip along the grape-trellis, where numerous hollows showed the work of the Foster hens. Slowly, but not too slowly, she approached the syringa-bush. Mrs. Foster, on her own back porch, was quietly brushing a winter coat, turning the pockets and rubbing off spots.

“Oh, Roy!” called Hale clearly. “Here are four eggs under this bush.”

“That’s good; we can use them,” came

clearly from the other porch, before Roy, seeing the big idea, began to choke in smothered laughter.

“Shall I bring them up?” asked Hale.

“Sure! The more the merrier,” came the answer.

Hale gathered up the eggs, listening all the while for a sound from the Fosters’ porch. Yes, there it was. She rose to find Mrs. Foster close to the boundary fence.

“Excuse me, little girl,” she said, blandly; “but I think those eggs belong to me. My hens must have laid them there.”

“I’m sure I don’t know whose hens laid them,” answered Hale, sweetly, “but if it was yours, they won’t any more than pay for the scratching up they have done. I suppose Aunt Nan will be more reconciled to her losses if the good biddies give her an egg now and then.”

So saying, Hale turned and tried not to make undue haste getting back to the porch. Roy, not daring to trust himself, had vanished into the house.

Having carefully replaced the eggs in their

pan, Hale joined him at the kitchen window, where through the sheltering scrim curtain, they had a view of Mrs. Foster with a pan of corn earnestly enticing her wandering birds back home.

When they were safely gathered in, and Mrs. Foster, walking very stiff and straight, had also withdrawn from the scene, the two young people set out their little plants.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SIXTH OF JUNE

THE sixth of June!

Hale opened her eyes a bit sleepily at first, then remembering what day it was, sat up and looked about her.

Sunlight flowing over everything, dew shining on the grass, birds calling from tree to tree and flashing their wings in the sun. Good!

It was early, of course, but what did that matter! She would get up. Being up and dressed, she found it was only five o'clock. Never mind!

She went down-stairs and out into the sweet June morning. Michael was already out, tying up the rose-bush against the porch.

"What brought you about this time o' the day?" he wanted to know.

"Michael, you're hopeless! Haven't I

told you a hundred times that my father is coming to-day?"

"Is it to-day?" gasped Michael in excellent surprise. "Well now! I must 'a' lost a day somewheres, or are you ahead o' time?"

"Don't try to tease me, Michael. I shall simply explode if I have to wait another day. It's bad enough to wait till noon. I'm going to look at my garden and see if any weeds have come up over night."

"You're expectin' too much o' the weeds, I'm thinkin'. Shure it was fair eight o'clock last night when you left off worryin' their poor lives out o' them. You should gi' them a little time to take their beauty sleep," laughed the irrepressible Michael.

"I might have overlooked one or two," Hale offered as a more plausible excuse. "You mustn't laugh at me to-day, for I've so much to contend with."

"Contend!" repeated Michael, coming down and shouldering his ladder to bear it away. "What have we been doin' for a week back, but sweepin' away all obstacles

so 's you could have everythin' ready for your pa?"

"That's just the trouble," Hale pointed out. "I've seven hours to wait and it takes patience. I almost wish I had a lot to do, so I couldn't notice the time so much. I shall arrange it that way next time, if I ever let my father go off again without me."

"No doubt 'twould be as well to try it for a change," sympathized Michael, with vivid memories of the tyranny of Hale's exactions during the past week.

Hale's garden-plot was as clean as a newly-swept floor. It looked very smart in its morning freshness. The pansies ought to be picked to-day, but they were to be left there for Father to see. The vases in the house were to be filled with fleur-de-lis from the crowding hundreds that flooded the corner, a monument to Tom Cleary's stubbornness. The choicest of the roses were to be put in Father's room.

How could she ever wait till the 12.20 train pulled in! It might even be late; it often was. Hale wished she hadn't thought of

that. On the other hand, if it came in on time by hurrying away from the junction without waiting for the western train, that would be worse, much worse, for it would mean three hours more of waiting.

She tried to dismiss all thought of the day's great event and quite suddenly remember it in time to get to the station. Of course, that was impossible, as she very soon discovered. If school were only in session! Why should Daddy choose Saturday? Well, of course, there would be the afternoon together.

Time does jog on, however, and the long-awaited moment arrived. When the train was heard to whistle down at the curve, on time, Hale's heart went down into a bottomless pit, and then suddenly rose to her throat and stuck there. She was sure the train hadn't waited for the western connection. She turned her back and swallowed hard, but her heart would not go back where it belonged.

She heard the train rumble and creak to a stop, she heard the baggage-master rattle

by her with his heavy truck, she heard the people tramping the platform, she heard their greetings, she heard the conductor's shouted command, the warning clang of the engine bell, and the exhaust of steam as the train took motion to depart.

Not till then did she turn slowly round to confirm her fears, and found herself face to face with her father.

"What sort of a greeting is this?" he gasped, through her choking embraces.

"Oh, 'scuse my back, please, Daddy dear! I was so sure you'd missed the train I couldn't bear to look. Oh, Daddy, Daddy darling!"

Neither Grandmother nor Aunt Alice would divide Hale's welcome by going with her to the train. They both greeted the traveler in the doorway and relinquished him to Hale again. She could not keep her eyes away from him, nor herself out of his lap, till Delia brought the news of dinner and it became necessary for each to occupy a separate chair at the table. Even then, she devoured more Daddy than dinner, so to speak.

"I'm going to take this young lady for a little walk," Mr. Merrill announced as they left the table. "She thinks she has some things and places to show me and we may have a few words to say to each other."

They toured the garden and the orchard and then struck off across the field to the river, talking to cover the months of their separation.

"It isn't difficult to see, my little girl, that the hardship of living in Hawthorne doesn't bother you much now. I've been wondering whether you want to stay on here, or shall we open up the city house?"

Hale drew a deep breath before she answered: "I want to do what you want to do, but I hope it's what I really want to do."

"That sounds Irish!" laughed Mr. Merrill.

"Blame Michael for that; he's quite Irish and I'm apt to catch things of that sort. What I mean is, I'll gladly live wherever you say, but I hope you'll say Hawthorne. Couldn't you write here as well as anywhere?"

She hung breathlessly on his answer.

“Better!” was what he said, and she capered happily.

“You see, I have a great many friends here, and besides, I like the country best,” she explained.

It was quite unnecessary to have said it; her father could not have been the student of human nature that he was without seeing that Hale was practically made over. She was taller, more robust, more independent, more alive than he had ever seen her before.

“Remember how sure you were that it would be horrid to live in the country,” he reminded her.

“I was ignorant then. Now I know. I don’t suppose I can explain what I mean, but here we don’t live just to ourselves as we did in the city, and I think it’s lots nicer. We are sort of in company with each other in everything.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” said her father, patting the hand she had snuggled into his turned elbow. “I missed the ‘in company’ feeling all the time I lived in the city. I think we shall agree on that. Do

you know a house over on the turnpike called the Bowman place?" he added, quite irrelevantly.

Hale knew the place and added the information that it had been vacant all winter, but had recently been sold. No one had come to live in it as yet, but the garden had been plowed and planted as if some one intended to.

Having by this time followed the river upstream to the turnpike bridge, Mr. Merrill asked Hale if she would care to walk a little farther. Anywhere, she told him.

"The fact is," he explained, "I know the man who intends to live there and I have undertaken, while I am here and have a few weeks on my hands, to oversee the repairs and the gardening for him till he can wind up his affairs and take possession."

The house was an everyday little house which Hale had never taken the trouble to look at very particularly. She tagged after her father while he inspected every room and made half-audible comments to himself. He seemed bent on doing his duty by his absent

friend, for he gave much closer attention to details of worn doorsills and blistered paint and loose window-frames than Hale thought necessary, writing many items in his pocket note-book.

“How do you think this dining-room will look when those two narrow windows are knocked out and a row of three wide ones put in, high enough for a buffet to stand underneath?”

“All right,” said Hale, indifferently.

“There’s a fireplace in here that’s been boarded up, I think.”

“Is there?”

“Yes, and one in the sitting-room, too. We’ll have to open them up and see if that isn’t an improvement.”

Hale acquiesced politely, but it must be confessed that she felt herself defrauded of her father’s valuable time by this unknown and inconsiderate friend. Her spirits brightened when her father at last said he was ready to go home.

As they walked down the street he suddenly turned, right in the midst of something she

was saying, and looked back at the little house.

“How do you think it would look painted white with green blinds?” he asked, after a long scrutiny.

“All right,” said Hale, without interest. “Almost any color would be better than that dirty gray.”

She was a little hurt because her father did not ask her to finish her interrupted remark. It was disappointing not to be his first and only thought on this day of all others. She clung to his arm and walked on in silence.

The evening by the fire was an improvement, however, for her father talked of his western experiences and of his play, which was now finished and in the hands of a producer. He also questioned Hale about the Dramatic Club and her other interests, and made up for the preoccupation of the afternoon by sympathetic attention to the details she poured forth.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN ENGLISH FÊTE DAY

HAD Hale been less occupied with the final preparations for the school festival which was to include the Old English Fête Day, she might have felt the lack of her father's undivided attention as the June days went by.

Certain it was that he spent many hours in the cottage known as the Bowman place, with a small army of workmen who had much ado to keep out of each other's way. Never was work rushed more relentlessly. The electricians were pushed to keep ahead of the paperers; the painters followed close on the heels of the carpenters.

Windows appeared where windows had never been, and fireplaces had their faces unveiled after long retirement. Antiquated plumbing was ripped out and replaced by

shining nickel and enamel. The outside of the house received its transforming coats of white, set off with green blinds.

On a day about two weeks after his return, Mr. Merrill made a trip to the city to be gone several days.

“Don’t dare to stay over the twenty-ninth, Daddy dear,” cautioned Hale. “You must see our wonderful Fête Day, whatever happens.”

“I’ll be back in plenty of time,” he promised. “Never fear! I wouldn’t miss it for a fortune.”

“Did I give you that list of costumes we want you to order? Oh, yes, of course I did. Don’t forget them whatever you do. And the wigs for the gentlemen-in-waiting, Daddy, they must be white and queued, you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Bless me, how important we are! Does it all depend on you, little corporal?”

“Don’t tease, Daddy dear! Of course, I’m not very important, but I’m some help, I guess. I must go now, for I promised to be there to practise the Morris Dance before

school. Beatrice Philips is so awkward she puts everybody out, and, of course, we can't say anything to hurt her feelings, so we just go through it and through it till we are ready to drop. Good-by, Daddy dear."

Mr. Stickney's plans had been working out well. He had turned every activity of the school to account to make the closing exercises a credit to the town. The effort expended was no more in the aggregate than it would have been had each teacher prepared some simple visitors' day program for her room alone. A part had been provided for every separate child and, best of all, no Mrs. Mother would have to lament that while she was hearing her Nellie speak a piece in the first-grade room, her Percy was at the same moment reciting his in the sixth with no fond parent to hear him.

When the time arrived, the common was as gay as a garden of poppies, as the children in their quaint costumes circulated among their guests to show themselves off and be admired. This was, to every one's mind, much better than keeping them hidden till the

moment of action. Mr. Stickney had reasoned that restraint would be an unnecessary hardship for both teachers and pupils. The costumes might as well be admired at leisure, since once the action started there would be so much else to see.

To this end he urged the children to carry out the spirit of the English Fête Day by greeting all the guests and spreading neighborly feelings both before and after the program. The gong would call them to their places when it was time for the events to be run off.

Grandmother Merrill, Aunt Alice, and Hale's father were the center of a constantly shifting group of players, for Hale kept bringing them up to explain them to her family.

"These are the fairies, Father, see! All the first and second grade girls. Aren't they darling with their wings and antennæ? Run, Laura May, and bring Robert over here. I want Father to see some of the elves. The first and second grade boys are the elves. Such cute little scamps you never saw before.

Oh, here you are, Roberty-Bobbet! How's that for a black-eyed elf, Father?"

"Adorable!" exclaimed Mr. Merrill, swinging the imp to his shoulder, to the delight of the group. Small Robert was not so sure of his safety. He wriggled down and ran away, as a new group came swarming up to be inspected.

"These are the next two grades, the flower girls and pages for the king and queen. The girls will have baskets of flowers, but we don't let them have those till it's time to begin. The fifth and sixth graders will wind the May-pole. The seventh-grade boys are chimney-sweeps; I'll find one."

Hale skipped away to find a chimney-sweep and came back leading a group of them.

"No velvets and laces for these fellows," she explained, "but they like it this way. They even like having their faces smeared."

"You bet!" agreed Dick Ryder, with a grin. "First time I ever got ready for a party that I didn't have to have my face clean."

"I'd hate to meet this crowd on a dark night," laughed Mr. Merrill, glancing from face to face, each as grotesque as the use of charcoal could make it.

"Careful of your brushes," cautioned Hale, "don't let them hit against the ladies' dresses."

Off they capered, in high delight, the envy of all the other boys, who watched them roll on the grass and rough each other about without fear of spoiling their clothes.

The seventh-grade girls were milkmaids, very quaint and demure in their big white aprons and stiff starched caps. Their milk-pails were gayly festooned with buttercups and yellow streamers.

Robin Hood and Maid Marian had been picked from the eighth grade, with their classmates for attendants, the lads in Lincoln green and the lasses in red skirts and black bodices with white waists; a gay and gallant company.

"My grade is the Morris Dance group, as you know," Hale reminded them. "Now I want you to see the special characters. The

high-school pupils are all taking parts. There are the king and the queen talking with Mr. Stickney. The court ladies and gentlemen are lovely. Some of the girls haven't much idea what to do with such trains, but they look lovely; and the boys do certainly look handsome in their black velvets and white stockings. Their wigs change them so, don't they?"

"You'll wear yourself all out, young lady, if you don't quiet down and stop dancing about," cautioned her father.

"Oh, no!" Hale flung over her shoulder as she caught a glimpse of something and ran to an opening in the crowd to look at it.

"It's the hobby-horse," she explained, coming back. "Here he comes. Isn't he funny!"

The hobby-horse came cavorting over the green, backing and charging, plunging and kicking in a most erratic fashion. His "rider," who was none other than Frank Parsons, showed great skill in managing so spirited a steed. So masterfully did he handle the reins and the whip that even the

grown-ups forgot that, concealed by the gay caparison, it was Frank's legs that gave the motion. As for the little folks, they watched the tossing head and flowing tail, saw the little artificial legs flopping perilously against the fat sides of the hobby, and were sure the creature was four-footed and alive. They squealed with terror or delight in turn, according as the hobby horse was headed toward them or far afield.

Frank was under promise to Mr. Stickney not purposely to annoy or frighten any of the little folks, and Frank was keeping his promises these days and trying to deserve the good opinion of the right people. He cantered up to Hale and her group and halted for inspection.

"You're making a great hit!" Hale assured him.

She introduced him to her father.

"Certainly you have the knack of making the little creature look alive," Mr. Merrill commented, heartily.

"I feel as if he is alive," said Frank, running his hand up along one stiff ear, as if he

expected to get the usual responsive toss of the animal's head. Then as the gong struck for assembly, he whirled away and galloped full tilt up to the schoolhouse.

The kaleidoscopic movement which began the moment the gong sounded very soon resolved itself into a complete separation of the players from their spectators. The latter moved into place and found seats on the temporary bleachers which had been arranged for their comfort; and the show was on.

The King and Queen, Henry VIII and his Catherine of Aragon, were heralded by minstrels and accompanied by a vast following of lords and ladies, flower-girls and pages, and a ridiculous clown. When they were seated upon their throne and their retinue properly bestowed, the revelry began with the dance of the elves and the fairies.

The Queen of the May was chosen and crowned. Then followed in turn the May Pole dance, the Chimney-sweep drill, the Milkmaids' dance, and a contest at archery among Robin Hood's band. The Morris Dance was the last of the special events.

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Each dance was heralded by the minstrels and applauded by the King and Queen and all the court. The clown had his own peculiar stunts to run off between the dancing numbers, and the hobby-horse registered his delight and approval by galloping wildly across the green and cutting capers innumerable.

There had been some discussion as to the best song with which to close the exercises. Some thought an English song would be the best, others favored something patriotic. The choice finally settled upon "America," which, Mr. Stickney tactfully pointed out, was both English and patriotic. The audience was invited to join in the singing and to linger for sociability and simple refreshments.

They lingered, certainly, as if they couldn't tear themselves away. It was a pleasure to see them so neighborly, and to hear their glowing praise.

"I don't believe there is another town in the State could make such a splendid showing."

“Of course there isn’t, nor another school with such likely children.”

“Nor a principal anywhere to compare with Mr. Stickney.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BOWMAN PLACE

“**I**T has been a gala day!” declared Mr. Merrill, smiling lovingly upon Hale, who was more excited and radiant than ever. He wondered how he ever could have worried about her and thought her a frail child.

The Merrills were almost the last to leave the common, chiefly because they were waiting for Hale to speak a last word to this one and that one, to gather up her scattered belongings, and to make up her mind to leave the spot.

When at last she was ready to go, she found her father alone.

“Grandmother and Aunt Alice had a chance to ride home with Mrs. Porter,” he told her. “Are you too tired to take a look at the Bowman place with me? I want to

see if the steam-fitters finished their job to-day.”

“No, I’m not tired,” said Hale. “Are you going to slave all summer on that Bowman house? I want you a little to myself now that school is out, Daddy.”

“You can have me!” promised her father. “The owner will be moving in this week, and after that I shall not have to leave you. We can be together all day long.”

As they drew near the cottage Hale exclaimed in delight over its improved appearance. She had not seen it since that day three weeks ago.

They went first into the cellar where they found the workmen packing up their tools.

“Yes, the job is finished, Mr. Merrill,” said the boss. “You’ll find that’s a good furnace and easy to run. The little girl could run it if need be. Good night.”

They went up to the kitchen where fresh paint and new brasses made a cheerful atmosphere; going from thence to the dining-room through a pass-pantry full of new cupboards and drawers. The new windows had

quite transformed the room. It was light and airy now instead of dull and close. The fireplace suggested cozy breakfasts and suppers when the brightness of a fire would mean more than the heat it threw out.

They found the front rooms somewhat encumbered with furniture, carefully burlapped and tagged.

“That’s good!” said Mr. Merrill. “I thought it would be here to-day. See this, Hale, how do you like the front hall?”

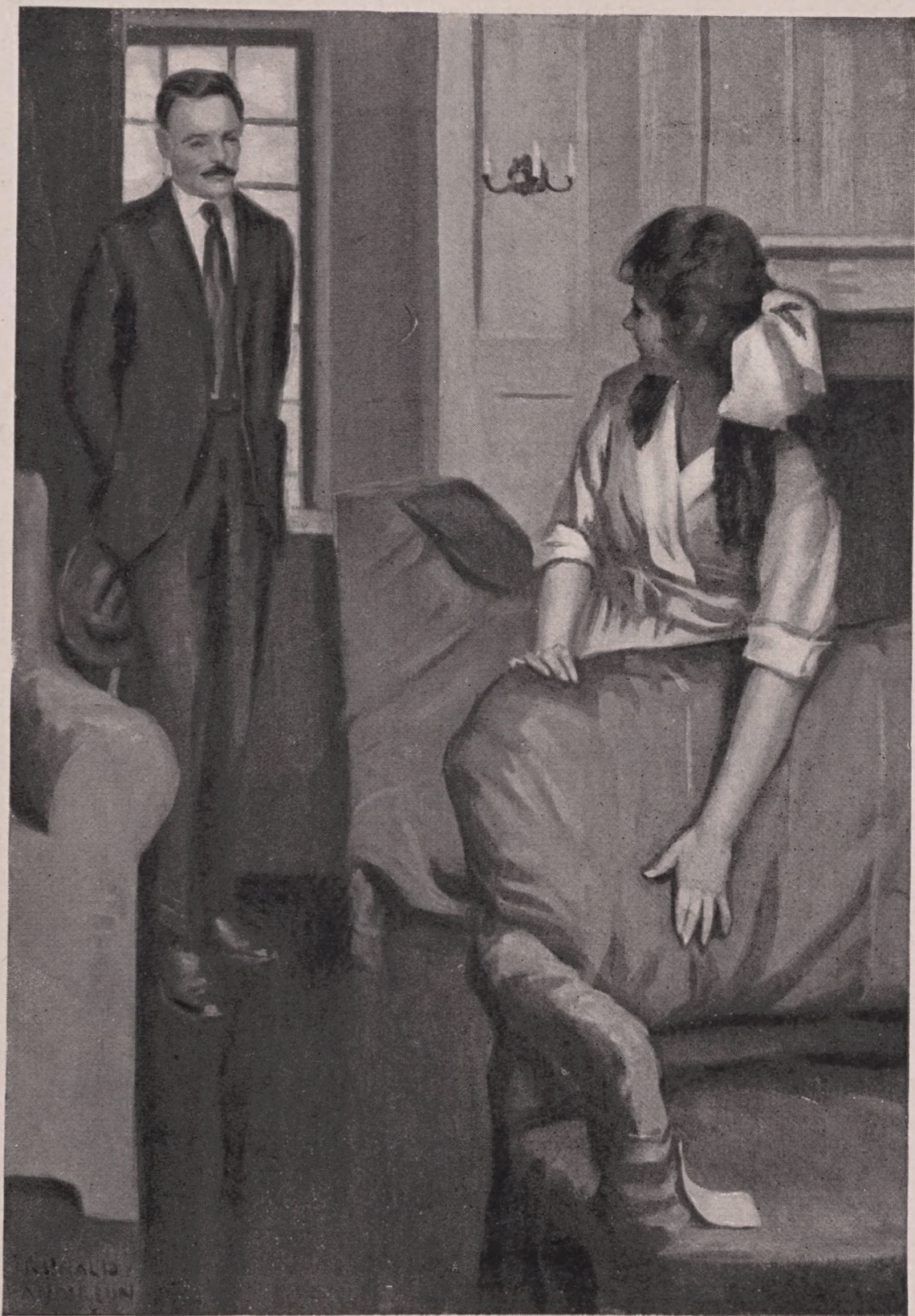
“Wait a minute, Father; I’ve just thought of something.”

Mr. Merrill turned where he stood in the doorway and observed that Hale was examining the tags on the separate articles.

“Why are these all sent to you?” she asked.

“Because I was the one to receive them. Don’t you think that’s the right idea?”

“I guess so,” said Hale, coming now and pushing past her father in an excited sort of way. Her whole manner had changed. She looked eagerly about with quick birdlike turnings of her head, gave a hasty assent to her



“IS THAT OUR SOFA, OR IS IT NOT?” — *Page 329.*

father's remark about the hall and hurried into the other front room. It also had furniture, covered and tagged. Hale pounced upon the tags.

"Lower northwest," she read and looked suspiciously at her father. "How did the man know just which room to send his things to?"

"He knows all about the house. Why shouldn't he?"

"I don't know," murmured Hale, studying the shrouded old-fashioned sofa. She ran her fingers thoughtfully along the curve of the high back, and looked again suspiciously at her father who stood with a half-smile in his eyes regarding her expectantly.

"Daddy, do I 'suspicion' correctly?" she asked, quoting a phrase from Michael O'Shea. "Is that our sofa, or is it not?" Then as her father's expression broke in spite of the effort he made not to give himself away too soon, she flew at him and nearly strangled him.

"Daddy Merrill, *are* we going to live here? Just you and I? *Does* this cunning house

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belong to you? *Was* it your own work you were having done all the time? Say!"

"Yes, to all those questions. Now what do you think of it all?"

"I think it is heavenly," said Hale. "Now show it all to me again!"

There was nothing the least bit indifferent about Hale's inspection this time, nor about her approval either. She examined every nook and corner, every drawer and cupboard, upstairs and down, the front porch facing west and the long veranda on the north. She admired the old-fashioned stairway with two landings, and the parlor walls with their wainscot as high as her father's head.

She located her own room and her father's, and an adorable white bathroom, and a guest room, and a study for her father's work. She looked out of windows to see the view and glimpsed an alluring old brick walk leading away to the garden.

"We can have fleur-de-lis bordering the walk," she exulted. "Michael will move it for us in August. Can't you just see it in a picture, Daddy! If we could only have Mi-

chael to work for us! He simply loves a garden into doing its best."

"Grandmother says we may have Michael half of each week."

"That will be heavenly."

It was fast approaching Aunt Alice's immovable supper hour when Mr. Merrill finally succeeded in separating Hale from her new toy.

"You mustn't get too much of it in one day," he warned her, "because we shall have to be pretty busy for several days getting it set to rights and ready to live in. I don't want you to get sick of it."

Hale scorned the idea.

"I'll never get sick of it. I can hardly wait to begin. What troubles me is that I don't know enough about keeping house to do it right for you, Daddy dear."

"Bless your heart! I don't expect you to. Of course you will be the housekeeper, the one who carries the keys, I mean; but I have a fine strong woman engaged to come Saturday who will bake and brew and serve us two. Will that be nice?"

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"Heavenly!" said Hale for the seventh time within an hour. "Now I shall really belong to Hawthorne for ever and ever; and that will be heavenly, too."

Of course, Grandmother and Aunt Alice already knew the secret of the little house. They listened sympathetically, however, while Hale poured forth her enthusiasm, to the neglect of her supper.

"There, Hale," said Aunt Alice, at last, "you have talked so much and eaten so little we are all waiting for you to finish your supper. We must let Delia have the table now, for she and Michael are going to their church festival to-night. Bring your cake and strawberries out to the porch if you want them."

They sat on the porch till darkness fell, talking sometimes of the future, sometimes of the past.

"I didn't much think last September I'd be as happy as this," said Hale. "Wouldn't it have been dreadful if Father had listened to me and taken me out West or put me in an orphan asylum?"

“Rather dreadful, I should think,” said Grandmother, “for a little girl who was needed so much right here in Hawthorne.”

“A little girl who needed Hawthorne so much, I guess you mean,” suggested Hale.

THE END.

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